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FREEDOM, AUTONOMY, AND EDUCATION

by



EAMONN CALLAN

A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled FREEDOM, AUTONOMY, AND EDUCATION submitted by Eamonn Callan in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Philosophy of Education.





FOR MY PARENTS



## ABSTRACT

How we conceive the nature of education depends to a large extent on our general moral outlook. From a commonly held moral perspective that might aptly be described as both egalitarian and liberal a conception of education can be derived which has strong affinities with the child-centred tradition in educational thought. This study comprises an attempt to sketch this general moral outlook and to set forth in rather more detail the view of education and schooling that is appropriate to it.

The first two chapters deal with the central liberal ideas of freedom and autonomy. Conceptual analysis is combined with a defense of a certain conception of the moral significance of these ideas. A range of personal liberties can be shown to be necessary to the adequate exercise and development of autonomy; and these liberties, it is argued, are those we would expect to characterize a free society.

In the final chapters the basic philosophical problems of education and schooling are addressed from the liberal-egalitarian viewpoint. The profound relevance of students' interests in the educational process is discussed, as well as the nature of a liberal moral education. Some suggestions are offered about how personal autonomy may function as a goal of schooling. The radical critique of schooling, as an institution that inevitably mis-educates, is shown to rest on conceptual confusions; and a defense of compulsory schooling is presented on the basis of a liberal theory of paternalism.





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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a detectable shift of tone in educational discourse. It would be roughly accurate to say that whereas we formerly tended to discuss educational problems with a strongly optimistic sense of our ability to solve them we now address them with a depressing sense of their intractability. At the end of the last century John Dewey could confidently affirm that schooling was the high road to a better society if only we based it upon the right sort of educational philosophy.<sup>1</sup> In a famous article published in the 1950s even a sober empiricist such as B.F. Skinner could foresee an educational system infinitely more effective than the present one if only the right form of behaviouristic pedagogy were adopted.<sup>2</sup> Utopianism pervades some of the important policy documents of the following decade, such as the Plowden Report in Great Britain and the Hall-Dennis Report in Canada.<sup>3</sup> Nowadays such optimism is much less conspicuous and is likely to be regarded as rather quaint. Among contemporary educators I suspect that the school is commonly seen either as a necessary evil, not unlike our penal system, or at best as a modestly beneficial institution from which we must not expect too much. The latter attitude, for example, is strongly reflected in the movement for competency-based education. Even if we continue to espouse social ideals such as liberty and equality we are liable to think that schooling can contribute little to their realization. However, I suggest that the dominant tone of contemporary educational debate is frequently cynicism masquerading as realism. Educators have abandoned the illusion of omnipotence only to embrace the illusion



of impotence.

Underlying our change in attitude are two very different views of the nature of schooling. Our former optimism was supported by a sociologically naive view of the school as an institution that could function independently of the other forces at work in society. Therefore well-intentioned teachers, regardless of what was going on elsewhere in the community, could transform children into fulfilled and productive adults. Our present pessimism is supposedly buttressed by a sociologically sophisticated image of the school as a marginally important institution that inevitably mirrors the inequities and imperfections of society as a whole. Even if this image were entirely accurate it could hardly justify the educational pessimism with which it is commonly associated. Far-reaching educational reforms may well be impossible without far-reaching changes in other parts of society, but this merely indicates that the implementation of reform is a more complex business than we once imagined. Earlier theorists may well have exaggerated the potential of schooling as an instrument of good, but I would suggest that the rather dismal failures of mass schooling cannot simply be explained away as the inevitable defects of an inherently limited institution. We have also been guilty of a lack of imagination in our approach to schooling because we have failed to develop and enact a conception of education that accords with our moral ideals. This dissertation grew from a desire to formulate the conception of education that egalitarian liberalism requires. (For brevity's sake I shall refer to this viewpoint henceforth as liberalism). In so far as my readers share a moral outlook that is fairly pervasive in our culture (at least at the level of professed belief) they can,





I hope, be persuaded to look at education in the way that I shall recommend.

There is an obvious danger in appropriating the term "liberalism" for a moral position one wants to clarify and recommend. Throughout the history of Western thought this term has been associated with a range of disparate principles and beliefs. For that reason its use may evoke associations that mislead others as to one's own principles and beliefs. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a more or less determinate consensus among some of those who make up contemporary Western society which can suitably be described as the liberal position. Accurately describing this consensus in any detail, however, is not an easy task. Much of the difficulty here stems from an important distinction that Ronald Dworkin has drawn between constitutive and derivative positions in a politico-moral theory.<sup>4</sup> Constitutive positions are valued for their own sake whereas derivative positions are chosen as the best means of implementing constitutive opinions. Very different constitutive positions may lead to identical derivative positions and hence blur the distinction between beliefs which are liberal and those which are not. Conversely, logical blunders and differences about empirical matters may lead those who share the same constitutive morality to opposing derivative positions. For these reasons we may find extensive moral agreement between liberals and non-liberals, and extensive disagreement among liberals. Disentangling liberal morality from this complex web of consensus and dissension poses a formidable problem of analysis. We cannot simply identify this morality with whatever set of principles would be generally regarded, at first glance, as expressing the essence of



liberalism because people can be mistaken not only about the fundamental moral convictions of others but also about what their own basic convictions would be upon reflection. Prior to reflection we are unlikely to hold fully consistent sets of moral beliefs which will all survive the light of scrutiny. Principles one tacitly and complacently subscribed to, for instance, may turn out to have absurd or obnoxious implications; and hence one is stuck with the unsettling options of either abandoning a long cherished principle or accepting the objectionable implications that must go with it. What one assumed to be a constitutive moral position may turn out to be derived from more fundamental principles. Given these complications, an explicit formulation of the liberal viewpoint must involve systematic reflection upon those principles and more particular beliefs that are widely regarded as liberal so that these may be revised to eliminate inconsistencies, absurdities and counter-intuitive implications. What emerges from this process is a reflective view, all things (or as many as possible) considered, of social morality. If this can still be regarded as the liberal viewpoint it must be fairly closely related to the principles and beliefs with which reflection began because it must appear to capture what is distinctive and ultimately important about that viewpoint in its pre-reflective form, but there may still be very significant differences between the two.

In the chapters that follow rather more pages are given to the exploration of two key liberal concepts -- freedom and autonomy -- than to education and schooling. That should not be surprising. Philosophical problems tend to hang together in such a way that seriously examining one of them commonly necessitates the serious



examination of others. In the philosophy of education interesting problems are almost always embedded in larger issues that preoccupy scholars in other areas of the discipline. My main purpose in the ensuing argument is to show why certain fundamental value judgements, which I trust would command fairly widespread assent, lead us to conceive education in a certain way. The force of the argument will obviously depend upon an elucidation of the moral position from which the liberal conception of education is to be derived; and the lengthy first and second chapters, in which scarcely a word is said about education, are intended to provide that elucidation. What is offered there is not, of course, anything like a comprehensive portrayal of the liberal viewpoint, but I trust that what I say is sufficient to enable one to accurately construct the conception of education it entails. Much of the conceptual analysis that is undertaken in this earlier part of the thesis may also turn out to be acceptable to those who find liberalism unacceptable as a substantive theory for one reason or another.

Almost nothing is said in the dissertation about equality. This may seem to create a damaging gap in my argument since liberalism has been often regarded as a set of beliefs that follows from a certain way of adjudicating between the ultimate moral claims of freedom and equality. Whereas the conservative attaches overriding importance to freedom and the socialist favours equality at the expense of freedom the liberal tries to maintain a judicious compromise between the competing demands of both principles, or so it is argued. If all this were true then by focusing on the idea of freedom and the related concept of autonomy, as I do, one would arrive at a grossly distorted





picture of liberalism; and this distortion might be expected to carry over into any discussion of education and schooling which presupposed that picture. However, I believe that liberalism is actually a more integrated theory than the idea of a rough compromise between freedom and equality might suggest. The claim that freedom simpliciter has any real moral importance has come in for some stringent criticism recently,<sup>5</sup> and I shall align myself with the critics of that claim in the first chapter. Against the background of such criticism it might appear that what is essential to liberalism is some principle of equality, and this proposition has been very ably championed by Ronald Dworkin.<sup>6</sup> But the purely relational concept of equality does not seem to have the highly pervasive moral significance that Dworkin accords it in liberal thought. If his theory were correct then violations of rights, say, would at least normally be reducible to inequalities of consideration and respect; and such a reduction is hardly possible. Having one's rights violated could doubtless be described as being shown a lack of due consideration or respect, but whatever inequalities might be involved in the violation could nonetheless be all morally irrelevant. If I am incarcerated in my apartment by an oppressive dictatorship the evil of their action does not consist in the fact that others are allowed to roam freely while I languish in confinement. The evil consists in what has been done to me, irrespective of what has or what has not been done to others. What is distinctive of liberalism, I suggest, is a conception of moral concern that is dependent upon certain beliefs about the significance of human life, such as the belief that autonomous forms of life are preferable to others. These assumptions are what shape the liberal conception of





education. The egalitarian thrust of liberalism derives from the conviction that all human beings are equally entitled to this concern. To pursue the egalitarian implications of liberalism into the domain of educational policy-making would be to undertake a fascinating task, but it is a task I have chosen to ignore. The point to be emphasized here is that my omission does not compromise what I have attempted. The concept of equality becomes morally relevant in educational discourse when we are considering problems of distribution because there the question arises of whether our provisions will discriminate unjustly between different cases. But the question of whether an educational distribution is just is largely distinct from the questions of how we should conceive education and what institutional framework it requires. These are my concern in the last two chapters, and I believe that whatever might be said about justice in educational distribution would supplement rather than contradict the content of those chapters.



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," in Dewey's Educational Writings, ed. F.W. Garforth (London: Hernemann, 1966), pp. 44-59.

<sup>2</sup> B.F. Skinner, "The Science of Learning and the Art of Teaching," Harvard Educational Review 24(1954): 86-97.

<sup>3</sup> Plowden Committee, Children and Their Primary Schools (London: H.M.S.D., 1967); Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario, Living and Learning (Toronto: the Ontario Department of Education, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Dworkin, "Liberalism," in Public and Private Morality, ed. Stuart Hampshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 116-117.

<sup>5</sup> See Charles Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" in The Idea of Freedom, ed. Alan Ryan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 175-193; and Ronald Dworkin, Taking Rights Seriously (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 266-278.



## FREEDOM

Grave philosophical errors, which may lead to equally grave practical ones, commonly arise from mistaken views about the meaning of "freedom". The first half of this chapter is an attempt to arrive at a correct understanding of this concept and to point out some of the more dangerous misunderstandings that may occur in relation to it. Having outlined a satisfactory conceptual analysis we will be in a better position to examine freedom or liberty (I shall use these two terms interchangeably)<sup>1</sup> as a value in our political and moral thought. This problem of value will be the focus of the latter part of the chapter and will be an underlying concern throughout the remainder of the dissertation.

### Positive and Negative Freedom

The most straightforward use of the word "free" occurs when we talk of a subject which might have a certain property or exist in a certain relation but does not; and this use normally carries the suggestion that it is far more desirable that the subject does not have the property or exist in the relation than that it does. Thus we speak of skies free from clouds, streets free from litter, and so on. The meaning of "freedom" in these instances is negative in that valid application of the concept depends on the absence of something -- clouds, litter, etc. In discussing the freedom of human beings this negative aspect is often conspicuous, as when we speak of freedom from hunger or freedom from oppression. To be free from oppression, it might seem,





is to be rid of it in much the same way that a litter-free street is rid of litter. Consequently, it might be thought that "freedom", in the sense that concerns us in practical discourse, is essentially identical in meaning to that which we find in these easily analysed contexts. The word simply signifies a dyadic relation between a subject (e.g., a human being) and some condition, normally undesirable, which might apply to the subject but does not (e.g., political oppression).

However, if I talk of what I am free to do, as opposed to what I am free from, the emphasis of what I say will not be on the "negative" fact that a certain condition does not apply to me but on the "positive" fact that a certain condition does -- the fact that I am now free to do something or other, to take or relinquish a certain option. Given the marked difference in emphasis between statements about "freedom to" and "freedom from" it is easy to assume that there are two distinct concepts at work here, one positive and the other negative. Isaiah Berlin's celebrated essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty", appears to support this view by providing an analysis of the history of freedom as a political ideal which is based upon a distinction between positive and negative conceptions of the ideal. Berlin's definition of positive freedom actually has rather more to do with autonomy than liberty, but he assumes that the difference between the two schools of political thought he identifies is at least partly rooted in a distinction between "freedom from" and "freedom to".<sup>2</sup> (What I shall refer to as positive and negative freedom are not the substantive ideologies which Berlin is mainly concerned with but rather the ordinary ideas of "freedom from" and "freedom to" which





these ideologies supposedly reflect.)

Throughout the history of Western political thought, Berlin points out, we find writers who profess the importance of freedom but associate it with a society which, though self-governing, may severely circumscribe the lives of its individual members. Other political theorists who espouse the ideal of freedom have interpreted it as requiring non-interference by others within a domain of private or self-regarding conduct.<sup>3</sup> Since the former can be seen as preoccupied with the value of a society's freedom to be self-determining, while the latter champion the freedom of the individual from the interference of others, it might seem that the values of the former are attached to the idea of positive freedom while those of the latter centre upon the concept of negative freedom. The difficulty with this position is that if one looks hard enough at any particular instance of positive or negative liberty it normally turns out to be describable in terms of the other sort of liberty. For example, one might say that Berlin's putative adherents of positive freedom want the activity of collective self-determination to be free from the interference of elements outside the society and disruptive elements within it, while adherents of negative liberty want the individual to be free to determine his life as he pleases within the area of self-regarding conduct. Thus the dominant interest of Berlin's so-called proponents of positive freedom, given a different but perfectly accurate description of their position, appears to be in negative freedom; and the overriding concern of their ideological adversaries turns out to be with positive freedom, given a similar descriptive change. That is not to say that there is no significant difference between the two schools of political thought



which Berlin differentiates -- there obviously is -- but it is a difference to which the ordinary distinction between positive and negative liberty is wholly irrelevant. What we have generally in talk about the freedom of human beings is not two distinct concepts but correlative aspects of the same concept, one of which is brought into focus in the locution "free from ..." while the other is made explicit in the locution "free to ...". In these contexts freedom involves a triadic relation between a human being, a certain option or range of options, and some obstacle or range of obstacles to exploiting them.

But are there not statements about the freedom of human beings where the simple dyadic relation still holds? And might not this use of the concept be of considerable importance to us? Instances of this use seem far more frequent than they actually are because the locution "free from ..." is so commonly employed without explicitly mentioning the positive freedom which is the other side of the coin; and so it is easy to overlook the fact that the intelligibility of statements including that locution normally depends on the auditor's ability to identify, on the basis of contextual clues, the third variable in the relation. This error occurs in Berlin's brief response to Gerald McCallum's argument that the freedom of an agent necessarily involves both positive and negative aspects:

A man struggling against his chains or a people against enslavement need not consciously aim at any definite further state. A man need not know how he will use his freedom; he just wants to remove the yoke. So do classes and nations.<sup>4</sup>

All this is true but it does not show, as Berlin assumes it does, that here we have instances of purely negative liberty. A nation or an individual trying to free themselves from slavery obviously may not



have any definite idea about their future after liberation, and in fact their future might turn out to be superficially very like their past without their feeling any the less liberated. Nevertheless, a desire to be free from slavery is very unlikely to be separable from the desire to be free to live one's life without those limitations which are implicit in being the property of another man. In particular, the desire to develop a sense of dignity and self-worth is likely to be at the back of demands to be freed from slavery; for the achievement of that sense normally presupposes being able to live for oneself, and not simply as an instrument to another man's satisfactions, however benignly his owner might use him. Suppose I had no idea of what someone who wanted to be free from slavery wanted to be free to do or be in virtue of his liberation. Perhaps I am a slave who has no conception of human dignity and slavery is a rather comfortable condition in my society which I think befits human beings. Then clearly the expressed desire of someone to be freed from slavery would be quite unintelligible to me, unless he specified the new possibilities which freedom would open up for him. Fortunately, most of us understand why it is preferable not to be a slave than to be one; and so when there is talk about slavery, or other forms of oppression for that matter, it will commonly be focused on those oppressive conditions people desire to be free from rather than on those possibilities, tacitly understood, which liberation would leave them free to exploit. So it would seem that Berlin's instance of purely negative freedom does have its positive aspect, though it is an aspect which often need not be made explicit.

However, despite his inappropriate example, Berlin is clearly right that the freedom of human beings does not necessarily include





both positive and negative aspects. Positive liberty does entail a negative dimension because to be free to do or be something implies that one is free from whatever might impede his doing or being it; hence whenever the triadic relation holds it is correct to simply speak of it as an instance of positive freedom. But negative freedom from something does not necessarily imply the positive freedom to do anything whatever. Consider the position of someone who believes we would be much better off if we created a world where people were free to do nothing since virtually all their wants would be carefully contrived through genetic engineering and systematic conditioning. Being free to do something, as I shall argue somewhat later, implies choice between alternatives. If a man's wants have been manipulated so that he always acts in ways approved by his manipulators then, strictly speaking, he has no choices and is not free to do even those things he is unimpeded from doing. The advocate of this dubious utopia would realize that there are many obstacles to achieving his social ideal, and so he could argue that we should free ourselves from these obstacles. But these negative freedoms would not carry any positive liberties with them. In fact, their attainment would effectively mark the end of our positive freedom. These are instances of what we might call purely negative liberty: an obstacle to some state of affairs is removed but no correlative positive freedom is thereby secured.

I would suggest that purely negative freedom is a concept of negligible philosophical interest. It is not an important idea in the way that positive freedom is. In the first place, we should note that purely negative liberty seems to be valuable to human beings only insofar as it may help to bring about either some positive freedom or





some other good thing. This is hardly surprising if we reflect on it for a moment. For if becoming free from something does not open up, or at least help to open up, a new positive liberty, or help to bring about some state of affairs deemed desirable on grounds other than that of positive freedom, then it is difficult to see how it could possibly be of interest to us. Perhaps an example will be illuminating here. Imagine a state where a dominant majority despise some racial or religious minority. A law which existed forbidding members of the minority from attending university is repealed though the universities are still free to refuse them admission. Since the academic authorities are inveterately prejudiced they continue to debar members of the minority, and so the latter are just as unfree as they ever were to attend the universities. It is surely obvious -- it is to me at least -- that freedom from the restrictions of the old law would be of no interest in itself to members of the minority, though it would doubtless hearten them as a step towards their being free to attend the universities. In other words, the value attached to the purely negative freedom derives here from its being a necessary condition for the realization of a particularly desirable positive freedom. Possibly, other reasons could be adduced for regarding the appeal of the law as desirable -- one might see it as a move towards equality of legal status with the majority -- but it would scarcely be intelligible to say that one values this negative liberty per se, independently of the other values involved.

There is no genuine theoretical problem about the value of purely negative freedom. If a certain positive freedom is valuable then, to the extent that it is, the removal of impediments to its



realization is valuable. Similarly, if an egalitarian principle of distributive justice were desirable, say, then other things being equal, freedom from obstacles to its application would be desirable. When human beings regard something as important for them then the elimination of obstacles to its attainment is important for them. It is in this utterly trivial sense that just about everybody -- fascists, communists, anarchists, monarchists, even B.F. Skinner -- are all "for" freedom, or more precisely, the removal of whatever obstacles impede the realization of their ideals. But to ask about the value of removing obstacles apart from such attainments, as if that might be worthwhile in itself, is not sensible, to put it mildly. It is essentially the same as asking what value absence has, irrespective of the thing that is absent. The absurdity of this question is worth pointing out because it indicates that the potentially significant sense of "freedom", in the context of practical discourse, is the positive concept with the triadic relation it involves. If freedom has value in a non-trivial respect then it is freedom in this sense which must have it somehow. In the two final sections of this chapter I shall argue that only certain positive freedoms should be accorded deep moral importance; but that is at least a position to which there is a coherent alternative to which many reflective persons explicitly subscribe, though I would argue that careful examination shows it to be an implausible position.

It might be objected that I have been belabouring a rather trite distinction between what I have called purely negative and positive liberty. But it is a distinction which is easily obscured and obscurity in this area is peculiarly damaging. In the first



place, it enables one to disguise the true nature of illiberal policies by advocating "freedom from" whatever impediments exist to their success, as if one were thereby upholding liberty in some morally significant sense. We shall see a fine example of this rhetorical ploy somewhat later when Alfredo Rocca's fascist conception of "liberty" is examined. Furthermore, where this distinction is not firmly grasped criticism of purely negative freedom as an independent value may be misconstrued as seriously damaging to moral and political traditions which take the idea of positive liberty seriously, when in actual fact such criticism is quite irrelevant to these traditions.

Before I address the problem of the value of freedom it is necessary to press somewhat further with the analysis of the concept. In particular, the conceptual restrictions upon the different variables in the triadic relation need to be clarified. (Henceforth "freedom" and "liberty" will refer to the positive concept unless I indicate otherwise).

### Freedom For Whom?

Freedom is something that we can attribute to human beings. That much is trivially true, but as soon as one begins to specify how "human being" is to be interpreted in this context a philosophical issue of considerable importance arises. One might say that human beings are rational animals and that whenever one behaves irrationally or unreasonably he is not, strictly speaking, being human at all. Just as a pen is no longer truly a pen when it fails to fulfill its function of writing an individual who evinces a failure of reason is





being somewhat less than human. The faculty which is the very essence of humanness has been impeded by something external to it, even though the impediment might arise from something which, according to a looser conception of humanness, is part of the individual -- some overwhelming passion, for instance. This view has certainly had its appeal. It may seem in harmony with the assumption that our definition of key ethical terms should focus on what is most important in the rather loose and vague notions we ordinarily attach to them. It is, after all, somewhat plausible to say that if anything deserves this special status in our common idea of humanness or personhood than rationality does. Now if we adopt this restricted conception of a humanness we can say that human beings are free only to the extent that they do what is reasonable for them to do. Only if that condition obtains is an individual truly human, and therefore under no other conditions can he be a free human being. Thus to force someone to behave reasonably is not to make him, as a human being, unfree in any respect, at least if he would not otherwise have behaved reasonably. In fact, since true human freedom entails the proper exercise of reason one might go so far as to say that in such situations by forcing a person to behave reasonably one is forcing him to be free!

But if I want to do something which is admittedly foolish or even evil and I am constrained from doing it then surely, common-sense would say, I am unfree to do it. The question of whether I am free to do X is quite distinct from the question of whether X is a reasonable thing to do. Freedom is something which persons have or do not have as creatures who make choices, only some of which are





reasonable. Whenever it makes sense to talk of a human being choosing something it makes sense to say that he is free or unfree to do what he chooses. (I shall argue somewhat later that positive freedom is connected to the exercise of reason, via the concept of choice, in an important way; but this connection is much weaker than the one under consideration here).

The view that human freedom should be defined as the unimpeded exercise of reason does not square with ordinary language: that can hardly be denied. But this view is more plausibly interpreted as an attempt to revise our common ways of speaking so as to entrench a certain controversial value judgement in the conceptual framework of practical discourse: viz., the judgement that we are always justified in ensuring conformity to the dictates of reason, even when this requires the use of force. By obliterating the fact that freedom is abridged when force is applied in the name of reason one suppresses, or at least greatly inhibits, awareness of the possibility that such a policy might be unjustified. It might appear that conceptual moves determined by controversial value judgements are naturally and often permissibly made when talking about freedom. When we speak of institutions that secure for human beings what is valuable in liberty we often describe them as free institutions, even though they will normally work in such a way as to deprive us of some particular liberties. I shall discuss the relation between ideology and the concept of freedom in a subsequent section of this chapter; but for the present we should note two important contrasts between obviously innocuous uses of the concept, such as in the phrase "free institution", and the proposed identification of freedom



with conformity to reason. In the former case, the value-laden use of "free" is closely connected with the ordinary, neutral sense of the word: free institutions are designed so that those who are subject to them will possess whatever freedoms (I use the word in its ordinary, neutral sense) are necessary to personal well-being and dignity. But the class of actions that are in conformity with reason does not mark out a set of desirable personal liberties, as "liberty" is ordinarily understood. That class includes actions brought about through the use of force and therefore completely breaks the connection, which is essential to the ordinary concept, between freedom and the exercise of choice. Furthermore, the value-laden sense of "free" in the phrase "free institution" is not intended (or should not be intended) to supplant the ordinary sense of the word. If a form of government, say, is appropriate to the values of a liberal society then the institutions it comprises can aptly be described as free; but one can accept this description without denying that such institutions would make individuals unfree (in the neutral sense) to do certain things, such as persecute religious or political minorities. The linguistic manoeuvre we are presently considering, on the other hand, is designed to replace our ordinary concept through a stipulative definition of the human subjects of freedom. Thus it is not only a radical departure from the normal value-laden uses of "freedom" insofar as it completely breaks the connection between freedom and choice; but it also prevents or inhibits us, in a way that these normal uses do not, from making judgements we ordinarily make about freedom.

Any conceptual reform that restricts our saying things we



ordinarily want to say, where our motivation for doing so is not a demonstrable error of some sort, is to be viewed with deep suspicion. From a liberal viewpoint, this particular move in the direction of an Orwellian newspeak is especially objectional because the value judgement which purports to justify it is especially objectionable. A thorough justification of this point depends on much of the argument I shall develop in the remainder of the dissertation, but the main thrust of the liberal position can be indicated here. The protection of a certain area of freedom for the individual is essential if the liberal ideal of personal autonomy is to flourish and if those who fall short of that ideal are to live the best life possible for them. In exploiting these liberties individuals cannot be expected to always act as they ideally should; but persistent interference from outside, even if it is motivated by the best of intentions, will frustrate their self-realization. If the ordinary concept of freedom is central to the liberal viewpoint then it must be guarded against any "improvements" that would obscure its importance.

### Freedom From What?

Firstly, when is an obstacle severe enough to count as an obstacle to freedom? Secondly, it is a moot point as to whether only certain kinds of impediments are relevant here, quite apart from considerations of severity. These are the two issues, each of which turns out to have far-reaching implications, which I shall deal with in this section.

Something which makes me unfree to do X is not necessarily





something which makes X completely ineligible as an option. Political dissent can be expressed by people of their own free will in situations where they are not free to express it. That is to say, it remains an open option, something one can choose to do; but since grave penalties are inflicted upon those who take the option no one is really free to do so. Thus it seems to me at least potentially misleading to say that constraints, and only constraints, are obstacles to freedom. What we generally take constraints to be are preventive causes -- imprisoning a man so that he is unfree to publicise his beliefs, etc. -- but men are commonly made unfree to do X not by physically causing them not to do X but by persuading them, through threats, not to do X. In fact, what diminishes my liberty may be obstacles of quite diverse levels of severity: insuperable impediments to doing X, the risk of being regarded contemptuously by others, and so on.

There are good grounds for taking a rather lax view of when an obstacle is sufficiently severe to count as an obstacle to liberty. At least part of the point of making judgements about the freedom of human beings is to help distinguish oppressive social conditions from others. Judgements about freedom and unfreedom help in this task to the extent that they serve to pick out situations where an alterable impediment exists to a person's acting upon his actual or possible choices. These are the situations in which it is intelligible to ask if an impediment is really justified, and in this way the concept of freedom enables us to identify any social condition which might legitimately be regarded as oppressive. This view of the function of the concept of liberty in practical discourse will be argued more





fully somewhat later. I introduce it here merely to underscore the point that the usefulness of the concept in dealing with the problem of oppression depends on our not taking a stringent approach to the problem of when an obstacle is sufficiently severe to diminish liberty. For clearly oppression may work through petty hindrances as well as through constraints or severe penalties. Members of a despised minority might be subject to various minor restrictions which others are exempt from; and if these restrictions turn out to be unjustified then they are to be regarded as oppressive to some degree. But this fact is likely to be disguised if we take a more exacting view of what counts as an obstacle because in that case a state which imposed such restrictions could rightfully claim to accord equal freedom to all its citizens. Admittedly, to be something which actually makes me unfree to to X an obstacle must be fairly formidable: a minor loss or inconvenience attached to doing X does not make me unfree to do it. Nevertheless, even minor impediments may detract from my freedom, and their cumulative impact on an individual's life may be considerable. Therefore the question of their justification can be a serious one.

It is important to distinguish the meaning of freedom I am concerned with here, with the lax view it involves of when an obstacle is severe enough to restrict freedom, from another closely related meaning of the word. There is a use which reflects our interest in determining whether or not the behaviour of an individual expresses his choices or not. Thus we can agree with Hobbes that all actions which "men do in commonwealths for fear of the law are actions which they had liberty to omit."<sup>5</sup> When men act in obedience to the law



out of fear their action expresses their choice to avoid the risk of punishment which disobedience would incur, and so there is a sense in which they are at liberty to obey or disobey. But there is also a sense in which a man who refrains from speaking his mind in public because he would be imprisoned if he did is not at liberty to express himself. In this sense, being free to act in a certain way presupposes far more than being capable of choice. It requires that one's options have not become "loaded" in diverse conceivable ways, such as through being subject to legal restrictions. This is the meaning of freedom I am interested in here. It might be called social or political freedom for its central purpose, it would seem, is to identify social conditions which might, if the restrictions they involve turn out to be unjustified, be regarded as oppressive.

The two senses of freedom I have just distinguished are very closely related to a distinction between two meanings of voluntariness. Sometimes when we say that a particular action was voluntary we simply mean that it expressed a choice of the agent. On other occasions, however, what we seem to have in mind is whether or not the conditions of socially free action are satisfied. In this sense, someone might say that he does not voluntarily pay income tax, even though he chooses to do so, since the government compels him through tax laws. Confusing these two senses of freedom or voluntariness can be disastrous. The appeal of Robert Nozick's notorious argument that a man who chooses between working or starving in the genuine free market will do so voluntarily rests in part on this confusion.<sup>6</sup> Nozick would be uncontroversially correct if the sense of voluntariness he had in mind were that which corresponds to the "non-social"



sense of freedom; but he seems to assume that his point effectively undermines the position of critics of the free market who argue that voluntary exchanges may generate situations in which the choices of individuals are no longer truly voluntary. Now it would seem that this sort of criticism employs the concept of voluntariness in the sense which is related to social freedom. The point of the radical critics of the free market is that its operation brings about alterable social conditions in which many of the most important choices of individuals become "loaded" in ways which are oppressive. They need not (and should not) deny that these choices give rise to actions which are, in a politically irrelevant sense, free and voluntary. Engels certainly did not deny this in his famous remarks about the freedom of the proletariat under laissez-faire capitalism: "A fine freedom indeed, when the worker has no choice but to accept the terms offered by the middle class or go hungry and naked like the wild beasts."<sup>7</sup> Engels does not deny that in these circumstances the proletarian exercises choice nor that he is free in one sense. The gist of his position, as I understand it, is simply that this "fine freedom" is quite irrelevant to the issue of oppression, at least in this particular case. Although Nozick's moralised conception of voluntariness is very different from the one sketched here;<sup>8</sup> his defense of the free market against the radical clearly depends for its persuasiveness upon blurring the distinction between the two senses of voluntariness and positive freedom which I have outlined. Once we get a firm grip on this distinction any defense of the free market as uniquely safeguarding the conditions of social freedom and voluntariness begins to look decidedly suspect.







The second problem about what counts as an obstacle to freedom pertains to a conflict between two views which might be characterized respectively as conservative and neutral. Superficially, the distinction between these two views might seem to be an insignificant matter of diction: proponents of one theory take a somewhat broader view of what sorts of things can obstruct freedom than proponents of the other, and that's all there is to it. But as one begins to probe the distinction differences of considerable importance begin to emerge.

The conservative theory is that restrictions on social freedom do not include impediments to action that are not directly established by a legal or moral obligation or a particular act of force or coercion. (The "moral obligations" referred to here are those embodied in the current moral code of a particular society, which may or may not coincide with those approved by a given member's conscience). Thus, as Herbert Spencer argued, impoverished parents who lived prior to the introduction of mass schooling were free to send their children to school even though they were too poor to do so.<sup>9</sup> What prevented them from sending their offspring was not a legal obligation, or a moral one for that matter, but poverty; and since that is an obstacle to doing something which is irrelevant to judgements about freedom one can truly say that nothing made them unfree to send their children. In the conservative theory a distinction is made, which Isaiah Berlin expresses with characteristic clarity, between freedom and the conditions of its exercise: "If a man is too poor or ignorant or too feeble to make use of his legal rights, the liberty that these rights confers upon him ... is not thereby annihilated."<sup>10</sup> If all Berlin meant by this was that a man is legally free to do certain things whenever he



is not legally prohibited from doing them then this statement would be uncontroversially true, but his point is rather that when there are no legal prohibitions -- and presumably he would include moral obstacles and particular coercive acts too -- which prevent one from taking a certain option then one is free tout court to take it.

Poverty, ignorance or weakness pertain not to the problem of whether a man is free or not but to the problem of whether the conditions necessary for the effective exercise of freedom have been satisfied.

It is an obvious fact, though the pervasiveness of the conservative theory among philosophers may obscure it, that what we ordinarily take to be obstacles to liberty are far more varied than those recognized within the theory. A man does not say anything unintelligible or even odd if he says that being rich or poor, a paraplegic or bi-lingual, a brilliant cellist or a university professor enhances or diminishes his freedom in various ways, independently of the moral and legal prohibitions which his society imposes upon its members. Thus the conservative theory ought not to be construed as an explication of how we ordinarily use the concept of freedom. As I understand it, this theory rests on the assumption that the obstacles to freedom it focuses upon are the relevant ones for moral and political philosophers to concern themselves with. This in turn implies that no other impediments to freedom, as these are conceived in ordinary language, warrant practical justification. Although I know of no exponent of the conservative theory who has explicitly accepted these assumptions it is clearly essential to assess them in assessing the theory because otherwise the latter appears as a pointless aberration from our common ways of speaking.<sup>11</sup>



The neutral theory takes a much larger view of what counts as an obstacle to freedom. Any condition which, within a given society, is alterable and which prevents a member of that society from doing something he might choose to do impedes his liberty. This is rather opaque as it stands but an example, hopefully, will make it clear. Suppose a man's poverty could be eliminated if those within his society chose to alter the conditions under which they live then, given the neutral theory, his poverty is an obstacle to his freedom. The options which his poverty hinders him from taking, such as living in adequate housing, eating nutritious food and so on, are things he is unfree to do. It is important to emphasize that on the neutral view only impediments that are alterable within a particular society, which is that of the individual or group to whom the judgement about freedom applies, can be legitimately regarded as restrictions upon their freedom. Obviously, what is alterable in one socio-temporal context is not alterable in another. Impediments to action for medieval man which did not make him unfree because they were unalterable within his world are obstacles to the freedom of contemporary man if they have become modifiable in his social context.

This socio-temporal reference in judgements about freedom will vary enormously with the varying purposes of participants in practical discourse, but there is one controversial extension of this reference which should be noted here. It is sometimes assumed that individuals in the Third World, even if subject to benevolent and competent government, are unfree and oppressed by those who wield power in the developed nations. A global view is implicitly taken here of the society within which conditions can be deemed alterable and hence





classified as obstacles to freedom which might turn out to be oppressive. This is a view which we need to examine.

What I have outlined as the neutral theory is not identical to the even broader view of limitations upon freedom which leftist opponents of the conservative theory have sometimes taken. They have occasionally talked as if anything which impedes the satisfaction of an actual or possible want is an impediment to liberty; and in doing so they at least have ordinary language on their side. A man suffering from an incurable disease might complain of the lack of freedom which his affliction causes him. In the winter I might complain that I am not free to sun-bathe in my garden. Medieval man was not free, according to our common ways of speaking, to enjoy the benefits of air travel, even though the obstacles to this freedom were insuperable in medieval society. Here we have three statements about the freedom of human beings which are perfectly in accord with the rules of standard English; but in each case an impediment to action is assumed to be an obstacle to liberty which is not alterable within the society of the individual to whom the judgement applies, and is certainly not a matter of moral and legal obligations. (In fact, these obligations are merely a subset of conditions that are alterable from within a society; legal obligations can always be eliminated, new ones imposed, and moral codes revised.) But it should be noted that these statements, though they make perfectly good linguistic sense, are also peculiarly pointless. One could imagine someone uttering them while day-dreaming out loud but they could never constitute a relevant contribution to practical discourse. Since the obstacles to these freedoms are unalterable within the society to which the subject of the judgement belongs the





problem of justifying them in a moral and political sense just does not arise. We simply cannot change them so the question of what reason we have for changing them or leaving them as they are is precluded. "Ought" implies "can", in a certain sense of the word "implies",<sup>12</sup> and so if we cannot affect some aspect of our lives it is meaningless to ask if we ought to or not. From the viewpoint of moral and political philosophy it is clear that significant obstacles to a person's actual and possible choices are only those which are alterable from within the society to which he belongs, and to preclude from practical discourse what is not even conceivably relevant to its underlying purposes it is appropriate to say that no other obstacles are impediments to freedom.

The divergence from ordinary language which is embodied in the neutral theory is obviously justified. The question which faces us now is whether or not we should push this divergence even further and adopt the conservative theory. Are legal and moral obligations and coercive acts the only obstacles of moral and political interest? There is an astonishing lack of sustained argument in the literature on this point so in presenting the case for the conservative theory one is obliged to use rather fragmentary arguments which also turn out to be decidedly weak ones. Alan Ryan, for example, in a paper in which a variant of the conservative theory is presented, considers the view that the starvation of people in India makes them unfree. His argument against this view appears to be that starvation is a result of the inability of people to feed themselves, and since the question of whether or not someone is able or unable to do something is quite distinct from the question of whether they are free to do it



starvation is not an obstacle to freedom. However, when Ryan tries to explain why he conceives ability to be irrelevant to judgements about freedom in this instance, what he says, in so far as it makes any sense at all, supports the neutral rather than the conservative theory:

... to suggest that freedom is at stake is to invite the question of what persons or what social system is deliberately impeding someone's attempts to lead a happy life. To say that someone is not free because not fed implies that someone wants him to starve.<sup>13</sup>

There is obviously a good deal wrong here -- the assumptions that freedom is conceptually connected to happiness and that obstacles to liberty necessarily come about through deliberate imposition by others. However, I want to focus on the grain of truth which Ryan's comments express in a rather distorted form. If the starvation of Indians were something we could not alleviate, given available resources and ingenuity, then to say that their starvation makes them unfree, just as their legal and moral codes restrict their liberty, is to risk confusion on an important matter. For to refer to all these things as obstacles to freedom, as if one were thereby asserting something of moral interest, obscures the fact that one of these things -- viz., the starvation -- simply cannot be changed at present whereas the others can. Moreover, moral and legal codes reflect the deliberate actions and choices of human beings and hence, if the limitations upon human freedom which they impose turn out to be unjustified, they provide a relevant basis for judgements of moral blame. But the continuance of a level of starvation which is beyond human control could not, by definition, become a relevant basis for such judgements. To confuse these two cases can easily lead to allocations of moral blame which





are completely misdirected. Practical discourse is fundamentally concerned with the justification of human action and derived from this there is the interest in according moral praise and blame appropriately. Judgements about social freedom perform an important function relative to these concerns because obstacles to human freedom may be either justified or unjustified and thus give rise to judgements of moral praise or blame. Where starvation is beyond human control then the justification of its continuance is logically precluded, and for that reason to call it an obstacle to liberty would be to utter something both confusing and irrelevant. Given the assumption that starvation in India cannot be alleviated at present -- and that is giving a great deal -- Ryan's comments thus have some underlying plausibility. But all this merely elaborates what I have already asserted in discussing the neutral view: impediments to action which cannot be changed in a given society lack practical relevance to judgements about the liberty of individuals within that society. Ryan certainly does not show that abilities are irrelevant to judgements about freedom and that only coercive acts and legal and moral obligations can limit freedom. That would be true for moral and political purposes if the only removable impediments were these ones, but that is not so. The economic order is not an unchangeable "given", any more than legal and moral codes are. S.I. Benn and W.L. Weinstein have pointed out that in the early nineteenth century the idea of economic freedom was conceived in a strictly limited way since the economic order was regarded as constituted by laws as immutable as those of Newtonian physics. It meant simply the absence of legal restrictions upon pricing, contracts of employment, and other limited conditions regarded as alterable within





the context of laissez-faire economic theory.<sup>14</sup> As uncritical acceptance of this theory began to weaken the idea of economic freedom began to enlarge in scope. But beliefs that are psychologically comforting may persist at a tacit level long after they have been officially discredited. I suspect the comforting illusion that the economic order really is unalterable, more or less -- comforting, that is, to those who have a stake in the status quo -- has often motivated acceptance of the conservative theory.

At one point in "Two Concepts of Liberty" Berlin seems to endorse the neutral theory;<sup>15</sup> but elsewhere he has explicitly criticized it, deploying his distinction between freedom and the conditions of its exercise:

Useless freedoms should be made usable, but they are not identical with the conditions indispensable for their utility. This is not a merely pedantic distinction, for if it is ignored, the meaning and value of freedom of choice is apt to be downgraded. In their zeal to create social and economic conditions in which alone freedom is of genuine value, men tend to forget freedom itself; and if it is remembered it is likely to be pushed aside to make room for these other values with which the reformers or revolutionaries have become preoccupied.<sup>16</sup>

Presumably what Berlin has in mind here is something like this. To create conditions in which men are able to do those things they are already legally and morally free to do -- have regular employment, eat nutritious food, and so on -- it will often be necessary to create new legal and moral obligations. Those who see the creation of more favourable economic conditions for the masses as "the cause" of liberty will tend to ignore the fact that these new obligations are themselves limitations on human freedom; and in this way a linguistic manoeuvre will obscure whatever value is to be found in freedom from these obligations. We might call this the radical view of what counts



as an obstacle to liberty. It is a sad fact that those who have sought to end "economic slavery" have commonly evinced a cavalier disregard of liberties which are not conspicuously obstructed by adverse economic conditions, such as freedom of speech. But Berlin does not seem to appreciate that it is equally erroneous to overlook the relevance of economic factors to judgements about freedom. It is another sad fact that those who have argued for the minimal state, where moral and legal requirements have been drastically curtailed, have often been oblivious to the very severe restrictions upon human liberty which such a state would impose. I suspect that underlying the tenuous appeal of the minimal state we find the conservative theory. For if only legal and moral obligations restrict our social freedom then all we have to do, to realize the great value of this liberty, is to reduce the role of the state to certain very limited protective functions. In time, acceptance of these limited functions will probably bring about a corresponding moral tolerance of the diversity of forms of life which are legally permissible within the state. But the attraction of this utopia as a vast existential supermarket in which one can choose his form of life according to idiosyncratic preferences is a deception. For this attraction depends on our overlooking the reality of individuals within the minimal state who may find themselves deprived of liberties virtually essential to living a significant life. Equality in the possession of liberty at the level of legal and moral obligations may mask gross inequality in the possession of freedom due to economic inequality. In the context of the conservative theory individual liberty is an entity which is reduced in size every time a new legal or moral obligation is imposed.



What is ignored here is the very simple fact that a new obligation of these sorts may secure other liberties, far more valuable than the ones it extinguishes, elsewhere in society. Indeed my own share may be enhanced both qualitatively and quantitatively by my becoming subject to a new legal requirement. It is unfortunate that those who advocate the minimal state have been dubbed "libertarians", as if they were the staunchest upholders of the value of freedom. Two of their astutest critics, H.L.A. Hart and Ronald Dworkin, have made the mistake of conceding as much.<sup>17</sup> In truth, these "libertarians" simply uphold the value of a particular set of liberties which serves the interests of a particular class of individuals, though the conservative theory very effectively disguises this fact.

Whether we say that obstacles to freedom are exclusively a matter of legal and moral obligations and coercive acts or of adverse economic conditions, there is an attempt to bias the language of practical discourse by reserving the honorific word "freedom" for a specific set of social conditions which are ideologically appealing to one. Of course, if either theory were adopted it would still be possible to express ideas opposed to the favoured ideology: given the conservative theory, the radically inclined might repudiate freedom and emphasize economic equality; and given the radical theory, conservatives could still argue that individual self-determination, with minimal interference from the law and minimal expectations of moral conformity from other men, is far more important than the freedom espoused by the radicals. Nevertheless, whichever side managed to capture "freedom" for itself would have gained a considerable rhetorical advantage; and to the extent that it would the values implicit in





competing ideologies will very probably receive less consideration than they deserve. The neutral theory seems to be to be preferable to these others precisely because it is genuinely neutral on the substantive issue of which obstacles to an individual's doing as he might choose to do are justified and which are not. In this way it facilitates clear thinking about a question of supreme importance which should not be begged by conceptual manoeuvres.

I have tried to show that the neutral theory provides a better framework within which the important moral and political problems which pertain to liberty can be formulated. However there is one assumption I have associated with the theory which might still be disputed. Even if the range of obstacles to freedom should be interpreted as broadly as I have suggested it does not follow that the socio-temporal reference in judgements about freedom can legitimately apply to all nations, classes, etc., at a particular point in time. Are we warranted in extending the reference in this way? Now if someone in the Third World cannot do certain things, such as acquire an education, eat nutritious food, etc., because he is too poor and if his poverty is something that could be eliminated if those who live in the developed nations chose to do so, then the fact that his poverty is allowed to persist warrants justification. This is neither to say that it is or is not justified but merely that this is a situation in which the question of justification arises. To acknowledge this all one needs to accept is that moral relations between men exist across the boundaries between nations, classes, etc., so that the effects of our action and inaction on human beings in communities remote from ours may be unjustified. This is hardly controversial.



Moreover, if it turns out that our permitting a man's poverty to persist is unjustified then we can legitimately be regarded as his oppressors. This last claim may seem counter-intuitive by many people since we tend to associate the concept of oppression with active interference in the lives of others rather than inaction vis-a-vis the lives of others; but there is no morally important distinction here so there is no point in building it into the idea of oppression. Suppose a government officially grants freedom of speech to all its citizens. However, when those who express minority views are persecuted by the dominant majority it takes no preventive action nor does it punish the offenders. Let us suppose that the state could protect the legal rights of the minorities without bringing about some weightier evil than the violation of their right to free speech. Would such a state not be correctly regarded as oppressive of its minorities, even though agents of the state never actually persecuted the minorities? The active perpetration of an evil is not the sole basis for determining responsibility for its occurrence. Indifference to its occurrence where one is in a position to prevent it may give grounds for serious charges of blame. Thus even if it were true that our actions do not actually bring about the poverty of individuals in communities remote from our own -- and even that will be often dubious in a world where economic conditions depend so much on international trade -- the fact that we do not act so as to alleviate this poverty gives rise to the problem of justification. That is why it is appropriate to use the concepts of freedom and unfreedom -- and why it might be correct to use the concept of oppression -- in describing the relations between poor and wealthy nations.



## Freedom To Do What?

The things we are free to do are options we are free to take. That is why being free to do something is not equivalent to being free from all impediments to doing it. An example which Stephen Toulmin has used for a somewhat different purpose will illuminate this point.<sup>18</sup> A doctor discovers a small tumour attached to the hypothalamus of a patient's brain and when traction is applied the patient switches into a manic mood and utters obscenities. Afterwards he says, "I can't think what made me say that." Clearly, this is an example of behaviour which is not the result of a choice on the agent's part, and for the reason it would be preposterous to say that the utterance was something he was free to make. A necessary condition of being free to do something is that one can choose to do it -- it exists as an option for one which he may or may not take for good or bad reasons.

To give a thorough elucidation of the conditions under which an individual may be said to act as a chooser would be to complete a major philosophical undertaking, but a few general remarks can be made here. In Toulmin's example it is clear that the patient did not choose to utter what he did since his wants are patently irrelevant to the explanation of his utterance. Our choices are the expression of wants, and so when what one does reflects no desire on one's part the concept of choice does not apply. The idea of wanting is a difficult one which we shall return to in the following chapter, but something has to be said about it now to avoid misunderstanding. There is obviously a sense in which one can say that someone chose to pay





income tax, say, even though he did not want to. The desire that is relevant here is the one the individual would have acted on if only his situation had been a bit more favourable. If only tax-evaders were not subject to serious legal penalties Jones would not have paid the government a penny, but since the law does impose these sanctions he chooses to pay despite his desire to keep the money. But we can also say, surely, that this reluctant tax-payer wants to pay rather than go to prison. The meaning of "want" which is used in this context is applicable in any situation where we have an individual preferring one line of conduct among a limited range of options, even though the one he prefers may be barely less disagreeable than the alternatives he faces. It is wanting in this sense which finds expression in our choices and hence in our actions.

However, choice requires more than this because behaviour which expresses desire is not necessarily a matter of choice. Behaviour of this sort can occur when the actor is insane, subject to some addiction, or brainwashed, and so on. What appears to be missing here is the capacity to evaluate one's wants, in a more or less rational manner, or the capacity to control his actions in the light of this evaluation. The latter is missing, though the former is not, in the behaviour of an alcoholic who can see that his drinking habits are destroying his life and therefore that he should control them but is unable to act on this knowledge. For those who are insane, brainwashed, or indoctrinated, the capacity to rationally evaluate wants may have broken down completely or have never been developed. It is important to distinguish such cases from those in which the ability to critically assess one's wants exists in some measure, but there is a



failure to exercise it in a particular instance even though the agent could have done so -- e.g., when someone acts upon a mild destructive impulse, without regard for prudential considerations simply because he is largely indifferent to them. Even if it were true that he didn't stop to assess the consequences, the fact that he could have and could also have acted according to this assessment makes his action a genuine act of choice. The behaviour of such individuals will often reflect an unreasonable choice, but choices do not have to be reasonable.

The idea of a capacity to evaluate one's wants "in a more or less rational manner" is a vague one; and the fact that it is goes some way to explaining why reasonable human beings, presented with the same evidence, so commonly disagree as to whether a particular action reflects a genuine choice on the part of the agent or not. However, the standard of rationality we apply here is not ordinarily an even moderately stringent one. It would be a very bizarre criterion of choice which carried a criterion of rational capacity that was exacting enough to imply that most men and women, with their generally limited skills in deliberating on moral and political matters and their equally slight inclination to use whatever skills they have, are not really choosing when they vote in elections or make moral decisions.

There is, in fact, good reason for applying a very undemanding criterion of rationality in this context. I suggest that the point of discriminating actions which reflect choice from behaviour which does not is to determine when someone is responsible for what he does.<sup>19</sup> (Imagine that we have no interest in determining the latter. Would we have any serious interest in finding out whether



anyone chose to do what he did?) But it is obvious that nothing sophisticated in the way of rational capacity is presupposed by a minimal degree of responsibility: some understanding of what one is doing is necessary, certainly, but this understanding may be very rough indeed and compounded with a large admixture of fantasy. It is probably true, other things being equal, that the greater the individual's understanding of what he does the more praiseworthy he is if his action is good and the more blameworthy if it is evil. Thus we might say that among those who chose to support Hitler's anti-semitism individuals who understood the full magnitude of the policy were more culpable, *ceteris paribus*, than those who did not; but comparing degrees of responsibility is one thing and determining whether a choice was made in the first place, and hence that some minimal degree of responsibility is warranted at least, is another.

I have argued that what we are free to do are necessarily objects of choice -- options, in other words. But the conditions of choice, as we saw earlier, are not sufficient to establish social freedom. A man who signs a contract with a revolver pointed at his head chooses to sign rather than perish, but there is obviously a sense in which he is not free to act as he does. What one is free to do, in the sense that concerns me here, are options that are not loaded by being connected to certain obstacles which effectively destroy, or at least significantly diminish, the eligibility of alternative options. Being free to do something entails that one is free to not do it. That is to say, one can act as a chooser in a situation where impediments, of the sort discussed in the previous section, interfere neither with the execution or non-execution of





the act.

### Freedom and Ideology

I have outlined a fairly detailed account of what I call the social sense of positive freedom. I have also suggested that this concept is the one which is relevant in philosophical inquiry about the value of liberty. But it might be argued that discussion about the value of freedom is actually focused upon a very different and far more elusive concept. Undoubtedly, the most prominent uses of the word "freedom" are found in contexts in which it carries a strong emotional charge while its descriptive meaning seems to vary enormously depending on the ideology of whoever is employing the word. It is a commonplace that throughout the history of political thought the ideal of liberty has managed to capture the verbal allegiance of just about everybody. Equally notorious is the fact that this shared commitment does not constitute agreement about anything of substance: the "free" society espoused by the anarchist bears hardly the remotest resemblance to that of the fascist, and when one talks of the free institutions of a modern parliamentary democracy those who despise the latter are very likely to say that these institutions are actually instruments of oppression. The word "freedom" in these contexts would seem to have become a battleground for competing ideologies of enormous diversity, and to the extent that its sense would appear to have been stretched to the point of vacuity. It is not immediately clear what the previous analysis has to do with this protean and value-laden concept, and if the two are not



closely related the enquiry which follows will be at best tenuously related to what men have commonly been concerned with in championing the cause of "freedom".

There are some uses of the idea of freedom for ideological purposes which bear little or no relation to the concept I have been elucidating in the previous sections of this chapter. Alfredo Rocca's defense of the fascist conception of freedom is an example of this sort of use:

Our concept of liberty is that the individual must be allowed to develop his personality in behalf of the state, for the ephemeral and infinitesimal elements of the complex and permanent life of society determine by their normal growth the development of the state. Freedom therefore is due to the citizens and to classes on condition that they exercise it in the interest of society as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, freedom in the social sense is not at issue here. What Rocca calls the legitimate exercise of freedom is more accurately described as conformity to the will of those who wield power in the fascist state. To the extent that I am compelled to exercise this "freedom" in the interest of society as a whole I am not free to do so because I am unfree not to do so. Since the state dictates how I should act in these matters my options have become "loaded" by virtue of its coercive powers, and therefore I am unfree. Nevertheless, there is a sense, although a trivial one, in which Rocca is "for" freedom, and it is this which gives a semblance of linguistic propriety to his argument. What he is saying, to put it in plain English, is that the full development of the state according to the public interest requires that we free ourselves from all obstacles to the realization of that goal, including the arbitrary predilections of individuals; and since individuals are "elements" of the state



they too are freed from certain obstacles in this process. This is an instance of what I called earlier "purely negative freedom" and for reasons I gave then it is a concept of at best peripheral interest in social philosophy. Unfortunately, it is rhetorically useful to ideologues such as Rocca who can exploit its existence to steal the thunder of those who are genuinely committed to the importance of (social) freedom.

However, there is clearly more to ideological disputes about liberty than a conflict between those who are authentic exponents of social freedom and those who are its enemies but disguise their true allegiance, wittingly or unwittingly, by making a great fuss about the utterly trivial sense in which they are "for" freedom. For among those ideologies in which the idea of social freedom has real importance there may nonetheless be fundamental differences about how the terms "freedom", "free man", "free institution", etc., are to be actually applied. How can these differences arise?

It is an obvious fact about freedom that it is not something one can possess absolutely. In shaping one's life he is constantly faced with the need to choose this freedom rather than that one. Leaving this option open requires one to close that option, and so on. It is another obvious fact that in society the liberties of different individuals will come into conflict, and a basic function of law and morality is to resolve these conflicts by picking out the morally most important liberties and safeguarding them. For that reason any adequate normative political theory must specify what freedoms we should protect and whom these should belong to. But when we begin to answer these questions very large differences may begin to emerge.





One might accord overriding importance to the freedom of those who have come to possess property by certain approved means to dispose of it as they see fit. On the other hand, one might regard the freedom of all men to enjoy a certain standard of living as of the utmost importance, even if ensuring this freedom meant imposing very severe restrictions upon the institution of private property. It is very easy to see how at this point the ideologically neutral concept of social freedom can become moralised in the rhetoric of political antagonists so as to signify the particular values which each represents. In advocating the policies one stands for it is tempting to say that what one wants to secure is freedom -- as opposed to his illiberal opponents who are its real enemies -- and that in his utopia, and his alone, men will be truly free. In other words, what emerges from these conflicts are persuasive definitions of "freedom", "free man", etc.

The use of "freedom" as a vehicle for enunciating value judgements is not undesirable so long as two things are borne in mind. Firstly, it must be recognized that these definitions embody controversial evaluations and that given different judgements a very different content could be given to "freedom", "free man", etc. Unfortunately, this fact is rarely acknowledged. Instead, the ideologue tends to talk as if genuine allegiance to liberty were uniquely expressed in his own system of values and that those who espouse a different ideology cannot make any serious claim to uphold the value of liberty. Secondly, persuasively defined conceptions of freedom cannot be permitted to replace the concept of social freedom, though they can and should co-exist.



Ideological debate about freedom is rooted in the concept of social freedom which I have analysed, though it is liable to undergo considerable distortion in the process of such debate. From the viewpoint of political and moral philosophy the fundamental meaning remains that of social freedom; for it is in relation to this idea that the really significant issues about freedom in normative discourse can be clearly formulated: what is the value for human beings in liberty? do all particular liberties, or only some of them, have this value? how do we resolve conflicts between different freedoms? These are the questions which express our interest in freedom as moral and political beings, though the demands of winning arguments and making converts tends to obscure them. However, if they are not clearly posed then discussion of what is a "free man", a "free school", etc., will very probably remain at a pre-rational level. Persuasive definitions of these terms, without an explicit attempt to deal with these issues, merely beg the question.

### Freedom and Intuitionism

P.F. Strawson has distinguished what he calls "the region of the ethical" from "the sphere of morality".<sup>21</sup> The former subsumes our diverse personal ideals and conceptions of the good; whereas the latter stems from our concern to regulate the pursuit of these values in situations of social co-operation and competition. In this section and the next one I want to examine the place of freedom in the region of the ethical and then as a good to be protected by a liberal social morality. I shall locate the problem of the value of liberty in the



ethical theory (I use "ethical" in Strawson's sense) of pluralistic intuitionism. No attempt will be made to explicitly defend this theory, though in stating what the theory is I hope to convey something of its persuasiveness.

It is a fact about human beings that ethical conflicts arise not only between them but also within them. They commonly regard as intrinsically desirable things which turn out to be incompatible. Even when different values can be realized within the same form of life the extent to which an individual can pursue one will limit the extent to which he can achieve others. It is possible to be both a family man and a scholar, but while seriously pondering a philosophical problem one cannot simultaneously play with his daughter. Now someone who is committed to potentially conflicting ideals of paternal and scholarly excellence may nonetheless feel that they are combined in perfect harmony in the form of life he has chosen. Although his familial obligations limit the time he can give to his interest in philosophy and vice versa, he could believe that giving more effort and attention to one, even if it could be done without loss to the other, would be to have too much of a good thing. Therefore the balance he achieves in the pursuit of these goods could not be improved upon: each value, as he conceives it, can be realized fully without any adverse effect on the degree to which the other is realized. But more commonly it seems that what we achieve is a much more precarious and less satisfying balance in our attempts to live up to our ideals. In giving more time to my family at some expense to my philosophical interest I might feel that my priorities were perfectly sound, but my confidence might be tinged by





disappointment that I had to establish priorities in this area. I could feel that I was making a significant sacrifice in giving the extra time even though something was secured thereby which was of greater importance than that which was lost. This feeling will be especially painful when what is lost is perceived as strictly irreplaceable. If all that mattered to me ultimately were happiness then a choice between A and B, both of which are productive of happiness, would not be seriously disturbing. I might regret that I could not have it both ways, and for that reason my inability to take both options is, in a very mild sense, a necessary evil. The sense is mild because in choosing the option which looks as if it will yield the greater happiness I simply get more of what the other had to offer and, of course, other possibilities may always open up for me which further enhance my happiness. Losses incurred in one area may be fully compensated by gains made in other areas: nothing is irreplaceable except the one true value. This is an implication not only of utilitarianism but of any other theory of value which prescribes the maximization of a single good. But for many of us ethical choices cannot be made with the equanimity which monism permits. What we take to be good -- service to others, love and friendship, art, knowledge, etc. -- often seem scarcely commensurable when circumstances force us to choose between them; and so we cannot enjoy the easy assurance that losses relative to one can be fully compensated by gains relative to another. What we arrive at is neither a perfect harmony between different values nor a smug condition in which we have maximized our possession of the "one true good" but rather a rough compromise between the demands of conflicting



values which necessarily falls short of what is ideally desirable because the incompatibility of our ideals makes it impossible to meet fully the demands of all (or perhaps any) of them. The need to make this sort of compromise is a fairly pervasive feature of the human condition. Sometimes it gives rise to tragic predicaments in which, regardless of the choice that is taken, something of enormous importance has to be lost; but we are all familiar with more mundane situations in our lives when we have to choose between radically different goods. Such choices often force us to accept things which are necessarily evils in a much stronger sense than ethical monism permits for they are liable to involve losses which are strictly irreplaceable.

For those who have struggled with this sort of dilemma it will doubtless seem highly improbable that one could ever formulate a single standard of what is good or even a set of such standards arranged according to a rigid scheme of priorities. When we try to explicate one criterion of what is good we find it simply will not fit, even approximately, the complexity and diversity of things we take to be valuable; and theoretical simplicity does not provide grounds for drastically revising our judgements about these things. Precisely the same difficulty would seem to arise if we postulate a rigid hierarchy of criteria instead of a single one. Since problems about what the good life requires are so commonly confronted as a matter of choosing between things which scarcely seem commensurable, and since whatever "stable" priorities we have in these areas are so often upset, it may appear far more accurate to see ethical problems as forcing one to "simply strike a balance by intuition, by what



seems to us most nearly right."<sup>22</sup> Thus we arrive at the theory of pluralistic intuitionism. (I will refer to it henceforth simply as "intuitionism". Although this is not strictly accurate it will do partly for the sake of brevity and partly because it is commonly referred to as such in the literature nowadays.) It may or may not be assumed by adherents of the theory, as it is defined here, that our intuitions can disclose self-evident truths about what is good. But this issue is not of interest to me here so I will simply ignore it. What I have to say will be applicable to all intuitionist theories irrespective of the epistemological interpretation of intuitions which they contain.

Freedom is very commonly regarded as one irreducible element in the plurality of things which make up the good life. For many people losses of liberty can be grievous and other goods, even happiness, may be sometimes sacrificed for its sake. When a loss of liberty occurs it is often not only the things one might have achieved as a result of having it which are bemoaned but also the loss of the freedom itself. If I am denied liberty of speech in a certain context I might deeply resent the encroachment despite the fact that there was nothing I wanted to say which it prevented me from saying. Our intuitive repugnance to a world where universal happiness has been contrived through genetic engineering and environmental manipulation may appear unjustifiable unless we assume that freedom is a good which is ultimately distinct from others. Thus our commonsense would seem to endorse the view that liberty is an ultimate good in the domain of ethics. If this is true then it must be recognized as such within an adequate conception of social morality; and for that reason the





state becomes immoral if it persistently infringes upon the freedom of its citizens whenever some other good can be served thereby.

Thus the value freedom has in our pursuit of personal ideals and conceptions of the good makes it a matter of similar importance in the deliberations of social morality.

However it is essential to distinguish between two different things here. It might be assumed either that freedom simpliciter has fundamental moral value or that only certain liberties have some sort of deep moral significance. To say that freedom is valuable in itself, regardless of context, is to imply that this value is somehow equally evident in all particular situations in which the concept applies. Thus, as Ronald Dworkin has pointed out, to defend freedom of speech on the basis of some general argument in favor of liberty is pro tanto to defend the freedom to smash storefront windows and form monopolies.<sup>23</sup> In so far as one can argue cogently that freedom is good in itself one provides equally good grounds for upholding all particular liberties. Of course to value all freedoms equally as freedoms is not necessarily to value all of them equally: the intuitionist will acknowledge other goods and will value particular liberties differently in relation to them. Though freedom to do A and to do B have the same value qua freedom, the fact that one militates against the realization of some other good while the other does not leads, other things being equal, to different overall evaluations of them. In this way the view that we accord fundamental importance to freedom simpliciter can be reconciled to the fact that we attach enormous importance to some liberties while willingly sacrificing others in certain instances. On the other hand -- and this is far more plausible,



so far as I can see -- we might assume that only certain liberties are of deep significance for us, and that a great many freedoms are morally trivial. We would regard the latter simply as a contingent means to the pursuit of our ends. Where they did not affect, favourably or otherwise, our plans and projects we would take no interest in them; and if these concerns were marginally advanced by sacrificing such freedoms we would do so with alacrity. On this view, contrary to what Mill claimed,<sup>24</sup> all restraint, qua restraint, is not an evil: everything depends on the particular liberty that is at stake.

Obviously, one cannot prove to all reasonable men that one of these views is to be preferred to the other. Reasonableness is a very shaky basis for agreement about moral matters. However, it can be shown that if we adopt the widely endorsed view that freedom simpliciter is one of our fundamental moral commitments we are driven to conclusions that are flagrantly counter-intuitive. Even if these conclusions are such that a reader may find them less bizarre than I do, he will have to concede that they are at least very eccentric in our moral community and therefore that the view of liberty which they presuppose, although commonly endorsed by philosophers, is generally at variance with considered moral judgements within that community. Since no argument I have seen or can conceive of diminishes the intuitive implausibility of the thesis that freedom simpliciter is of ultimate moral significance I can see no reason to accept it. Moreover, in the next section I hope to show that the fundamental principle of liberal social morality -- viz., the principle of respect for persons -- indicates that some liberties, and only some, should



be accorded deep significance. This will strengthen my case against the view of the value of freedom under consideration here.

To justify the claim that a commitment to the fundamental value of liberty is intrinsic to our morality one would have to show that any freedom will carry weight in our moral deliberations, quite independently of other considerations, such as respect for persons, the maximization of happiness, etc. (By describing a value or ideal as "fundamental" or "ultimate" I mean that its importance for us is not simply a contingent matter of instrumental value relative to something else. Therefore each value of this sort must carry independent weight in our moral judgements.) It is important to stress that whatever force the case for valuing freedom simpliciter has will provide us with an equally good (or bad) reason for valuing any particular liberty since by definition it is equally supportive of all freedoms. Thus if it provides us with what is clearly a very weak reason for valuing a particular liberty -- so weak, perhaps, that it is scarcely distinguishable from having no reason at all -- then the view that freedom simpliciter has some significant moral weight for us will be shown to be false. How could one show this? It won't do to adduce cases where some obviously weighty reason tells against whatever presumption there might be in favour of liberty because that leaves open the possibility that this presumption is actually quite strong but is merely overridden in the particular case by even stronger reasons. What we need is a situation where the case against freedom is based upon reasons which we recognize as relevant but which we attach very little importance to. If one can show that in such an instance it would still, intuitively, be morally justifiable





to accept the argument against freedom then the case for attaching some significant worth to freedom simpliciter seems to evaporate. Only very weak reasons can be overridden by weak reasons; so if the presumption in favour of freedom in general can give way to a weak reason it cannot be of much moral and political interest, if it exists at all.

Suppose the flow of traffic in a certain city were marginally expedited if parking were prohibited on one side of a particular street. Since we think it is better if traffic can move more freely than it presently does this fact provides us with a relevant reason to prohibit parking on one side of the street. But it is a reason which carries very little weight for us. The ease with which traffic flows through the streets, provided it does not become intolerably slow, is not very important so marginal improvements are nothing to get excited about. (Slight gains relative to very important goals are not even anything to get excited about if they are slight enough.) Thus a reason not to prohibit parking will not need much force to convince us. If someone showed us, for instance, that business on the street would suffer some slight adverse effects as a result of the change then we might take this as a sufficient reason not to limit parking. Now suppose someone said that he opposed the change on the grounds that a general human right to freedom, which includes the right to park on both sides of all streets, is far too precious to be overridden for the sake of advantages which are admitted to be minor. Even if one finds this argument convincing, which I most certainly do not, one can recognize that the indiscriminate commitment to the value of freedom which it presupposes is still on extremely



shaky ground. For one must surely concede that it would be morally reasonable to prohibit parking, even if one believes that a general right to freedom provides a somewhat better reason not to enact the prohibition; and if this is reasonable then it is reasonable to override the right to freedom on grounds which are clearly feeble. Thus the alleged right turns out to carry so little force that it is virtually irrelevant to the purposes of practical discourse. However, I am inclined to go even further than this and say that this hypothetical argument against the prohibition is plainly preposterous. If someone put it to me I would have to say that here we have a situation where freedom simply does not count as a significant good at all. It matters in this instance only in relation to certain collective goals -- public safety, the efficient movement of traffic, etc. -- and is to be valued only when it facilitates the realization of these goals but not otherwise. To regard freedom of speech, say, in this light is intuitively unacceptable; but to accord fundamental value to all liberties, as if all were similar in importance to freedom of speech, is equally implausible.

I have subjected to a rather lengthy assault the view that freedom in general, as opposed to a specific range of liberties, has a non-trivial moral significance. In doing so it may seem that I have been giving rather more attention to a silly view than it really deserves. The trouble is that it is a rather pervasive silly view which can be very misleading. Ronald Dworkin has pointed out that loose talk about a general right to freedom can give rise to bogus conflicts of value;<sup>25</sup> and precisely the same difficulty arises for those who avoid talk of rights but nonetheless assume that that



freedom always has an ultimate moral weight. Suppose we are faced with a situation in which a particular liberty, which we assume must have this sort of significance since it is liberty, must be sacrificed in order to secure something else, which really is of fundamental value for us. Given that we perceive this as a conflict between two ultimate moral commitments, we may be led to think that the sacrifice is not worth making. But if we had a more explicit and coherent account of our moral intuitions, and of the commitments to general ideals and principles which underlie them, it might turn out that this conflict of values was really spurious because the particular freedom at issue was not of real moral importance. I suspect that arguments against school busing and income taxation derive much of their persuasiveness from this sort of confusion.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the view that freedom has fundamental weight, since it is intuitively so shaky, may lead us to sacrifice the truly important liberties far too easily. If the freedom to retain earned income can be so easily overridden to serve collective goals why should we not treat political and religious liberties in the same way? R.S. Peters, for example, assumes that our case against benevolent despotism must depend on some general argument in favour of freedom.<sup>27</sup> If that were so our case would turn out to be a very poor one.

Peters does nevertheless have the merit of presenting what purports to be such an argument, but it fails to establish what he wants it to. The point of practical discourse, he claims, is to determine what there are reasons for doing so that we can conduct our lives in the light of this knowledge. A reasonable human being is by definition seriously committed to the value of practical





deliberation, but if this is so he must also value the freedom to act according to reason for without this liberty practical deliberation loses its very point. Furthermore, the assessment of reasons is highly dependent on public discussion, and in the area of practical (as opposed to technical) discourse any rational human being can contribute valuably to this discussion. Therefore, Peters argues, a presumption in favour of freedom of speech and action can be postulated as a presupposition of practical discourse.<sup>28</sup> But it is perfectly obvious that there is an enormous range of liberties such that their exercise would drastically inhibit the progress of any form of rational deliberation: freedom to prevent one's political opponents from promulgating their views, to beat them up, to impede the actions of reasonable men, and so on. It is perfectly true that purposeful practical discourse presupposes certain social conditions if it is to get off the ground, and these will doubtless include certain liberties, but they will just as surely include certain restraints. To say that it presupposes a general presumption in favour of liberty is as silly as to assert that it presupposes a general presumption in favour of restraint.

### Freedom and Respect For Persons

Freedom simpliciter does not have fundamental moral value or else, what amounts to the same thing for present purposes, it has this sort of significance to a negligible extent. It does not follow that all liberties lack deep significance. But what criteria do we have for distinguishing those which have it from those which do



not? This is an enormously complex issue but unless we can provide at least a rough, intuitively plausible answer our commitment to the ultimate value of certain political liberties, say, as opposed to the freedom to park on both sides of all streets, will seem like an arbitrary matter of plumping for this rather than that.

The theory known as rule-utilitarianism might appear to offer a solution to this difficulty.<sup>29</sup> According to the most plausible variant of that theory, the content of our morality should be whatever set of practicable rules maximize average or aggregate well-being, and the notions of well-being, happiness and pleasure should be conflated. One could argue that rules prescribing respect for a certain set of personal liberties can be defended by a consistent exponent of this theory because some liberties normally do have a high social utility. Considerations of average or aggregate well-being would thus serve as the ultimate determinant of what liberties are of real moral importance. It is very doubtful, however, that rule-utilitarianism represents a real theoretical refinement of traditional act-utilitarianism, which prescribes the maximization of well-being regardless of rules and is notoriously incapable of supporting liberal sentiments about the value of freedom. For if a moral rule protecting certain liberties is justified strictly in utilitarian terms then it is difficult to see how adherence to the rule can be required when a transgression would bring about even minute utilitarian gains overall. This position contrasts sharply with a typical liberal view, such as we find in Ronald Dworkin's Taking Rights Seriously, that certain personal liberties can be abridged only to avert a catastrophe or something very near it.<sup>30</sup>



This divergence between liberalism and utilitarianism is not a superficial matter: it is rooted in very different ways of conceiving the moral importance of persons. From the utilitarian viewpoint individuals matter only as producers of happiness, and therefore no trade-offs between the satisfactions of different persons can be precluded on matters of principle. Although everyone's pains and pleasures are accorded equal weight in the utilitarian calculus this veneer of egalitarianism should not disguise the fact that the grossest inequalities in the possession of liberty (or other goods) might be justified by such reasoning. If the deprivations of some are a matter of immense satisfaction to others so that the sufferings of the deprived carry less weight in the calculus than the satisfactions they produce then a consistent utilitarian must support the deprivations. This is a familiar criticism of utilitarianism and the familiar reply is that as a matter of empirical fact serious utilitarian reasoning converges towards our pre-theoretic intuitions on matters such as equality and personal liberty, even though there is no inconsistency between the principles of such reasoning and intuitively obnoxious social practices. I suspect that the empirical basis of this reply is actually rather weak, but even if it were sound it is not clear that the force of the anti-utilitarian critique has been undermined. By calling attention to the offensive policies that utilitarianism may justify in principle one is not necessarily suggesting that as a matter of fact it will often do so. The main point of this criticism, as I understand it, is to illustrate the extreme moral bizarreness of the view of individuals as resources to be exploited in the single-minded pursuit of collective well-being.





Tyrants who claim to have sacrificed everyone's political liberties and the lives of a few troublesome critics for the sake of greater aggregate happiness may, as a matter of fact, normally have gotten their utilitarian sums wrong; but the depth of the liberal antipathy to such reasoning is hardly to be explained away as an aversion to bad moral arithmetic. The real source of that repugnance surely lies in the purely instrumental conception of individuals which the tyrant's computational reasoning presupposes. This conception is fundamental to all forms of utilitarianism and so whatever shaky support the theory can give our other moral intuitions cannot diminish the implausibility of its underlying attitude to persons.

I take it that a liberal defense of liberty finds its roots in a very different moral attitude to persons which is Kantian in spirit. According to this view, all human beings possess a worth or dignity which constitutes the very foundation of our social morality. This conception of personhood is expressed (probably too strongly) in the familiar claim that each possesses a "infinite" worth. Behind such claims is a recognition of the need to protect the individual's capacity for self-realization from being sacrificed whenever some collective goal could be served thereby. If each possesses "infinite worth" then it makes no sense to trade-off the sufferings of one against the happiness of others. Thus the dignity of human beings gives rise to what Robert Nozick has metaphorically described as "moral side constraints": i.e., human rights which safeguard each individual against unwarranted interference by others.<sup>31</sup>

There are certain dangers in the rhetoric associated with the concept of human dignity. Talk of the "infinite worth" of individuals



may beget the illusion that interfering in the life of any human being, no matter how slight the deprivation one causes, cannot be justified by advantages to other persons which the deprivation makes possible. The concept of human dignity can easily be exploited to provide a specious justification for a society of self-seeking egoists with minimal moral obligations of mutual non-interference. Fortunately, the logic of human dignity does not lead us towards this rather impoverished social ideal. Why this should be so will become clearer as we examine the basis of this attribute and the point of the moral concern that it calls for, but two points should be noted here. Firstly, it is most implausible to assume that any interference in an individual's life will be an affront to his dignity because many of our freedoms, as I argued in the previous section, are morally trivial. Secondly, even though individual human dignity may justify our ascribing to persons rights to certain liberties it is not at all clear that these ought to be regarded as utterly inviolable in every situation irrespective of the consequences. For example, does concern for human dignity require that we uphold the political liberties in a situation of social crisis when a failure to limit them temporarily will permit the emergence of a tyranny which will wholly disregard human rights? Surely not. It seems better to think of human dignity as setting moral limits to trade-offs between the losses of one person and the gains of others rather than absolutely prohibiting them.

Intuitively, I think that we can see that the idea of human dignity provides a rough criterion for distinguishing between those liberties which have deep moral value, those which are morally trivial,



and those which would certainly constitute an evil if countenanced in society. It is no affront to my dignity if I am denied the liberty to have sexual relations with whomever I choose, regardless of their consent; or the freedom to park on both sides of all streets, or the freedom to assault those I dislike and silence philosophers I disagree with. But I am degraded if other men make me unfree to have sexual relations with persons whom I choose and who choose me, or if I am denied the liberty to travel beyond the confines of my apartment or practise my own religion. To take these freedoms away from a sane adult is to degrade him, and though this is an evil which might be justified in terms of some other good, it would constitute a loss which was grave and strictly irreplaceable. But this rather vague intuition about the relationship between human dignity and the liberties we cherish needs to be explored much further. Why, one might ask, should this relationship exist in our moral thinking? This question will preoccupy us throughout the remainder of the chapter.

Personal dignity must be what G.E. Moore has called a "supervenient" quality -- a property that can be predicated of a subject only because a certain other property or set of properties also can.<sup>32</sup> The concept of worth, which subsumes that of dignity, marks out a range of supervenient qualities because no form of worth can properly be attributed to an object unless it possesses non-value properties which can be adduced to justify the attribution. The aesthetic value of a painting and the moral worth of a human being are not characteristics which inexplicably manifest themselves and persist independently of the non-value qualities which the painting and the





human being exhibit. Thus if two paintings correspond exactly with respect to all observable properties it makes no sense whatever to say that one possesses greater artistic merit than the other. Similarly, finding human dignity or worth in an individual must be "a way of valuing something based on an awareness of the kind of thing it is"<sup>33</sup> where the awareness is directed to non-value characteristics. The difficulty which now arises is to identify the latter.

Nozick has recently suggested a solution to this problem which has considerable *prima facie* appeal: the basis of our moral worth lies in the capacity we have to enjoy significant or meaningful lives.<sup>34</sup> The words "significant" and "meaningful" express a favourable evaluation here, but they also have a descriptive content which ties them to the world. Therefore one supervenient property is not simply being introduced to support another.

I suggest that the nature of a meaningful life is to be understood as analogous to that of a meaningful poem or story. Part of the point of the analogy is to emphasize the notion of overall coherence or harmony that is essential to both. A poem is not a random assemblage of individually significant words: its meaning depends on a purpose (or purposes) that integrates the particular words into a coherent whole. Without this unity a poem becomes pointless, despite the fact that it might contain arresting images or phrases. In a similar way, we are apt to feel that a significant life must approximate a condition of overall harmony for such a life is not a random sequence of independently valuable experiences. Like a poem, its meaning is to be located in certain continuities of direction and, most importantly, these continuities are in large part



an outcome of choice rather than accident. Thus it is natural to say that a person's long-term plans and commitments are the major source of whatever existential meaning he creates for himself. These plans and commitments give content to our dispositional interests and temptations and thereby add a dimension of value to our experiences that distinguishes them, in an important respect, from the experiences of animals. Our scientific knowledge now precludes any radical cleavage between human nature and the nature of the beasts;<sup>35</sup> but the notion of existential significance, vague though it may be, does appear to capture much of the moral importance we intuitively attach to the distinction between human beings and other animals. In a fascinating survey of animal studies Konrad Lorenz has shown that close parallels to the moral conduct of humans are to be found within an enormous range of species.<sup>36</sup> Yet Lorenz wisely refrains from asserting that similar behaviour must have a similar meaning. If a wolf refrains from attacking a fellow creature, say, when the other displays submissive behaviour then it is plausible to ascribe to the would-be attacker a desire not to inflict injury which is stronger, at least in this particular instance, than its aggressive impulses. But it is not plausible to say that the strength of this "altruistic" desire is to be explained by the fact that the wolf has chosen a form of life in which aggressive impulses are to be carefully curbed: it just happens that the "altruistic" promptings of the beast's nature are more urgent than competing inclinations in this context. For a human being, however, desires are not simply distinguished in terms of urgency. The wants of persons can be distinguished as base or noble, "higher" or "lower" because they choose enduring projects and commitments for themselves which generate



such discriminations; and for that reason human experience is meaningful in a sense that would appear to be virtually unique among the animals.

At this point we can begin to see why respect for human dignity should include respect for a certain range of personal freedoms. (I shall refer to these henceforth simply as basic freedoms or liberties.) If the basis of human dignity is the capacity to lead a significant life and if such a life is at least partly a function of the individual's shaping his experience in the light of an enduring conception of how he should live then respect for human dignity will at least partly be a matter of ensuring conditions that allow the individual to shape his experience in this way. There are some freedoms that are virtually indispensable if human beings within a given society are to live meaningful lives. I would suggest that these are the basic liberties.

If all freedoms were as irrelevant to the meaning of life as the freedom to park on both sides of the street then none would have deep moral significance. But it should be conceded that for many particular individuals the loss of some morally significant liberty will not be regarded by them as a serious matter. If I am inveterately contemptuous of all religions then being made unfree to join this or that particular sect hardly affects the meaningfulness of my life. Nevertheless, one is inclined to say that individuals possess a right to religious liberty which it would be wrong to override even when their possession of it is a matter of indifference to them. But this does not destroy the intimate connection between respect for basic liberties and the capacity to lead a significant





life. Imagine a society in which everyone is completely indifferent to religion and in which a law is passed, for some odd reason, forbidding all religious practices. Given the universal religious apathy we will probably concede that so long as it continues to be universal no one's capacity to live a significant life will be adversely affected by the law; but we might still feel that a genuine right to religious liberty had been overridden and as such the law had instituted a serious evil. How could we defend this position against that of the anti-religious law-makers? Surely we would have to argue in a way which presupposes that the purpose of giving people basic liberties is to enable them to develop and exercise their capacity to live meaningfully. We might point out that religious commitment is a highly pervasive feature of human existence; that it may subside in a society at one point in history only to emerge strongly at some later point; and that a man's religious commitments, when he has some, are likely to be among his most deeply held values. To deny him the right to express these commitments as he sees fit is therefore an unjustified evil, unless quite extraordinary circumstances prevail. Since in even religiously apathetic societies human beings are liable to develop religious predilections a law forbidding religious practices is at variance with respect for persons. Such a law impedes the development of the ability to lead a significant life in one enormously important direction even though at the particular time it is introduced those who are subject to the law do not want to develop their ability in that direction. Now if all this were completely false, if religious freedom were as tenuously related to the use of that ability as the liberty to park on both



sides of all streets then it is difficult to see how we could find the law strongly objectionable. We might find it silly but we could hardly regard it as degrading to human beings.

The connection between the meaning of life and the basic liberties becomes especially clear, I suggest, if we consider situations in which the capacity to live meaningfully has yet to develop in a human being or has been destroyed for some reason. We still want to accord such beings a moral worth we do not ascribe to other things in nature, and intuitively it might seem that this worth is the same as that which any other human being possesses. This does not force us to abandon the idea that the capacity to lead a meaningful life is the proper ground for human dignity though, as Vinit Haksar has recently argued,<sup>37</sup> it does require us to make certain controversial metaphysical assumptions if we do not abandon it. We must assume that if the capacity to lead a significant life or at least the potential to develop such a capacity is possessed by an individual at a particular point in his life the dignity it gives him is attached to the individual at any point in his life; and this in turn presupposes that it is correct to speak of the same individual, in some rather strong sense of "sameness", existing at different points in time.

If these assumptions are justified then what does respect towards someone who lacks the relevant capacity at a particular point in time involve? For those who have yet to develop it I would argue that respect is a matter of treating them in ways which facilitate the development of the capacity and for those in whom it has been destroyed moral concern demands that one treat them in ways which

1. The first part of the document is a letter from the President of the United States to the Congress, dated January 3, 1801. It is a very important document, as it contains the President's first message to the Congress.

2. The second part of the document is a letter from the President to the Congress, dated January 8, 1801. It is also a very important document, as it contains the President's second message to the Congress.

3. The third part of the document is a letter from the President to the Congress, dated January 15, 1801. It is also a very important document, as it contains the President's third message to the Congress.

4. The fourth part of the document is a letter from the President to the Congress, dated January 22, 1801. It is also a very important document, as it contains the President's fourth message to the Congress.

5. The fifth part of the document is a letter from the President to the Congress, dated January 29, 1801. It is also a very important document, as it contains the President's fifth message to the Congress.

6. The sixth part of the document is a letter from the President to the Congress, dated February 5, 1801. It is also a very important document, as it contains the President's sixth message to the Congress.

7. The seventh part of the document is a letter from the President to the Congress, dated February 12, 1801. It is also a very important document, as it contains the President's seventh message to the Congress.

8. The eighth part of the document is a letter from the President to the Congress, dated February 19, 1801. It is also a very important document, as it contains the President's eighth message to the Congress.

9. The ninth part of the document is a letter from the President to the Congress, dated February 26, 1801. It is also a very important document, as it contains the President's ninth message to the Congress.

10. The tenth part of the document is a letter from the President to the Congress, dated March 5, 1801. It is also a very important document, as it contains the President's tenth message to the Congress.

11. The eleventh part of the document is a letter from the President to the Congress, dated March 12, 1801. It is also a very important document, as it contains the President's eleventh message to the Congress.

12. The twelfth part of the document is a letter from the President to the Congress, dated March 19, 1801. It is also a very important document, as it contains the President's twelfth message to the Congress.

13. The thirteenth part of the document is a letter from the President to the Congress, dated March 26, 1801. It is also a very important document, as it contains the President's thirteenth message to the Congress.

ensure the best possible approximation of a meaningful life. This position helps to explain why respect for a sane adult requires ways of treating him which are radically different from those required in our dealings with the very young or the mentally-defective, despite the fact that all can plausibly be regarded as possessing the same dignity qua human beings and hence as deserving the same respect. To deny to someone who is senile, for instance, the freedom of movement appropriate to a normal adult is hardly to degrade him. In fact, one might argue that giving him this liberty would be degrading because it would not serve at all to improve the "meaningfulness" of his life but would merely lead him into situations fraught with anxiety and danger. A senile human being is not capable of living a significant life in the strong sense that a sane adult is, but he certainly is able to enjoy some aspects of such a life. He can pursue certain primitive interests, enjoy relations with other human beings, and so on. Behaviour which expresses the respect due to him will foster his capacity to live at this rudimentary level of well-being. Since giving him the basic liberties appropriate to a sane adult would certainly work against this goal to give them to him is to degrade rather than respect him. Thus it seems clear that even those liberties which count as basic in our dealings with normal adults cease to be basic when their possession would clearly detract from the meaningfulness of one's existence.

We can also see now why certain freedoms, if generally countenanced within society, become a very grave evil. To grant men the freedom to suppress the political or religious convictions of others whenever they please facilitates the self-realization of





no one and impedes it for just about everyone else. For even in situations in which it is not actually exercised to one's disadvantage -- perhaps it is never even exercised at all -- its very existence is degrading to everyone against whom it might be exercised. Its existence implies that anyone's political and religious views are not valued enough to warrant the protection from interference which society can afford. In this context, respect for oneself as a political and religious being and for others becomes at least very difficult because one's society respects no one as such; and so the shaping of a significant life in these two crucially important areas becomes at least very difficult. Where the freedom to interfere with political and religious liberties is often exercised the difficulty increases.

The concept of a significant life is a very formal one which can be given content in ways that effectively undermine the idea of respect for persons. Suppose we take the view that only a life dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, in which intellectual skills are perfected and exercised, can be truly significant. (This is different from the view that only such a life can be truly significant for oneself, though the distinction between the two is often disastrously blurred.) It seems clear that most people do not have the potential to achieve a life of this sort. Therefore, like the beasts, their existence cannot be truly meaningful; and hence they lack the highest dignity and do not deserve the respect appropriate to it. In short, some conceptions of a significant life are connected to meritocratic ideas of dignity and respect rather than to the idea of a dignity which all human beings have and a respect which all



deserve. Within a liberal social morality, however, the idea of a significant life that is operative is egalitarian. For the liberal, very ordinary human beings, as well as the gifted, may realize profoundly valuable lives. (In the following chapter I shall elaborate the liberal conception of a meaningful life in considerable detail.) Therefore the capacity to live in this way can provide the basis for a moral respect which is due to virtually all human beings.

But where there is fundamental disagreement about what a significant life requires it seems that agreement about what basic liberties persons should have is very unlikely to be achieved. If one believes that only the gifted have the potential to really flourish as human beings then one will very probably advocate a very different distribution of liberties in society than he would if he accepted the conception of a significant life assumed here. However, we should not assume that intractable disagreements of this sort inevitably lurk behind disputes as to what are basic liberties and who should have them; and that is why pointing to the connection between self-realization and these liberties is often a useful move to make in moral debate. Suppose one acknowledges that the point of basic liberties is to ensure that the capacity of individual human beings to live meaningfully can flourish. It might be shown that among the freedoms he believes are morally fundamental there are some which, if they were secured in our society, would work to the advantage of a particular class of individuals while not being strictly needed to maintain a significant life for them, and which at the same time would seriously impede the capacity of others to achieve self-



realization. If this can be done he must either repudiate the belief that these liberties are basic or else drastically revise his account of the grounds for regarding freedoms as basic. The latter is hardly an attractive option if one believes that the right to basic liberties is there to maintain respect for human dignity.

It will be noted that in order to work this argument will presuppose agreement as to what generally counts as a serious impairment of the capacity to live meaningfully and also about what is generally an unneeded good as opposed to a needed one in the context of such a life. Nevertheless, this sort of argument will, I suspect, often prove very powerful. For example, it might be deployed to good effect against the set of inviolable basic liberties embodied in the right to property which Nozick has recently championed.

For Nozick if certain conditions are satisfied which ensure that the initial appropriation of unowned property is just and if theft nor fraud occur in subsequent transfers then the distribution which emerges through time will be perfectly just, regardless of the fact that the most marked inequalities might emerge therein.<sup>38</sup> Thus one can easily imagine distributions coming about which it would be unjust to interfere with, given Nozick's theory of the right to property, but which would involve the most appalling deprivations for many individuals while others enjoyed a superfluity of goods. This is curious since Nozick argues that rights are grounded on the Kantian principle of respect for persons and conceives the moral worth of persons in a non-meritocratic way which is basically the same as the conception I have endorsed.<sup>39</sup> Now in what sense can Nozick's right to property express the equal respect due to all







human beings as persons when it may serve to justify non-interference in situations where extreme deprivation destroys the capacity to live meaningfully in numerous cases while others enjoy a superabundance of goods? If one is not prepared to repudiate this inviolable right to property then one must either abandon the Kantian foundations Nozick tries to give it or else postulate some interpretation of respect for persons which trivialises the principle. It is, after all, a very strange sort of respect which is shown equally to persons who enjoy a superfluity of goods, which they can dispose of as they please, and to those who suffer intensely in a condition of deprivation which only redistributive policies could effectively alleviate. Thus Nozick's virtually inviolable right to property appears in its true aspect as a moral rationalization for a social order in which the interests of those who manage to amass large amounts of property are very efficiently served, even if this means disabling everyone else from living meaningfully.

In exploring the idea that certain freedoms are of deep moral importance we must consider an assumption about the significance of human lives which I have not mentioned so far but which is absolutely essential if the area of liberty which is defensible as morally significant is not to shrink to vanishing point. This assumption is that autonomous forms of life are superior to others, even though a life which is significant to a degree may be heteronomous. Imagine a world in which everyone has become thoroughly heteronomous. It is not, however, a place inhabited exclusively by egotistic mediocrities but rather one in which the good things attainable in a state of heteronomy are achieved in large measure. Our hypothetical world could be one in which strong feelings of



solidarity have eliminated the evils of cruelty and loneliness. Aesthetic and scientific activity might thrive. Flights of iconoclastic genius are hardly possible in this context but the steady progress of a tradition which allows for limited innovation certainly is. However, it is clear that very little freedom could be left to human beings in this situation. For what heteronomy means, to put it very roughly, is that what one becomes is not determined by oneself. The relation between autonomy and liberty will be explored more fully in the next chapter. For our present purposes it is sufficient to note that a heteronomous society is one in which individuals enjoy at best very little freedom because social expectations are such a powerful determinant of choices. Heteronomy is one way in which the options of an individual may become "loaded" to a degree which makes him unfree. Now why should we not be willing to sacrifice whatever freedoms are necessary to bring about such a world, just as we are willing to sacrifice other freedoms to achieve other good things?

Berlin has argued that once we accept intuitionism we must abandon the idea that there is some utopian "closed" society to be discovered in which all human beings can find their perfect niche. Therefore we must give them a certain area of personal liberty so that they can shape significant lives for themselves according to idiosyncratic preferences.<sup>40</sup> But this conclusion is obviously not warranted by Berlin's premises. It is true that for the intuitionist no "closed" society will constitute the condition of perfect social harmony that Plato envisaged, but then again neither will any "open" society; and so being an intuitionist commits one to neither social ideal. To justify Berlin's conclusion it seems to me fairly obvious



that we have to argue that it is better that people shape their own lives in certain crucially important areas than that the judgement of others becomes the all-pervasive determinant of what one becomes. In liberal moral theory autonomy provides a crucial conceptual link between the meaning of life and the basic liberties. Moreover, the good of autonomy must be an especially important one because otherwise we cannot justify our sense that an heteronomous world, despite the valuable things it might contain, would degrade our humanity. I would argue that the defense of the liberties we take to be ethically ultimate depends on the legitimacy of autonomy as a personal ideal.

In many ways the position outlined here resembles that of Mill in On Liberty. Admittedly, he asserted that the value of liberty -- or more precisely, its value within the broad domain of self-regarding actions -- is to be grounded solely on the principle of utility; and that is a view radically at variance with the ethical theory assumed here, in which the right of individuals to basic liberties is assumed to carry weight in our moral deliberations independently of any utilitarian considerations. However, Mill does seem to adopt a form of ideal utilitarianism in On Liberty which acknowledges both that there are a plurality of goods and that the value of freedom depends on that of autonomy. He claimed that utility must be interpreted in the light of man's permanent interests as a progressive being. The famous principle of liberty he elaborated was not conceived as a contingent means to the fulfilment of these interests but a partial elucidation of what their fulfilment necessarily consists in. From Mill's viewpoint freedom within the domain of self-regarding conduct is assumed to be an essential constituent of





the well-being of those who have attained the maturity of their faculties.<sup>42</sup> Now to speak of man as a progressive being implies that certain forms of life are superior to others; and in the famous third chapter of On Liberty Mill postulated an elevated level of mental development at which one achieves the virtue of individuality to a high degree. In thought and action the most developed human beings are autonomous, self-determining, not dependent on authority and custom to determine what they are; but a society which facilitates the cultivation of autonomy must be one which gives its members the freedom that autonomy presupposes. But the idea of autonomy is a vague one which needs to be carefully examined, and its alleged relation to liberty also warrants closer scrutiny. These will be the concerns of the following chapter.



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> There may be some slight differences in the meanings that these words display in ordinary language, but I assume that the differences are not of philosophical interest.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. xlii, 127, 131-132.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 122-134.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. xlii.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, ed. John Plamenatz (Glasgow: William Collins & Co., 1962), p. 205.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 262-265.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Engels, The Conditions of the Working Class in England, trans. and ed. W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), p. 89.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia, pp. 262-265. Nozick's conception of voluntariness been criticised very ably by G.A. Cohen in his "Robert Nozick and Wilt Chamberlain: How Patterns Preserve Liberty," in Justice and Economic Distribution, ed. John Arthur and William H. Shaw (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), pp. 257-259.

<sup>9</sup> See Felix Oppenheim, Dimensions of Freedom (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), p. 120.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty, p. liii.

<sup>11</sup> It might be denied that the conservative theory involves any aberration of this sort. John Hospers, for example, has posited a distinct concept of freedom for which inability or lack of power may serve as an impediment, but Hospers asserts that this is not the concept of freedom that is fundamental to political philosophy. Thus we can acknowledge that the poor man is unfree to do many things the rich are free to do; but this lack of freedom, Hospers would have us believe, is of peripheral political interest. But why should the mere fact that poverty is one sort of obstacle to liberty and coercion another require us to distinguish two concepts of freedom? Ordinary language certainly does not require us to make this distinction and even if it did one would have no reason for saying that one concept of liberty was more important than the other, unless one's prior ideological commitments implied that poverty was a fact of secondary moral importance. See John Hospers, Libertarianism (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1971), pp. 10-12.



- 12 See R.M. Hare, Freedom and Reason (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 51-66.
- 13 Alan Ryan, "Freedom," Philosophy 40 (1965): 110.
- 14 S.I. Benn and W.L. Weinstein, "Being Free to Act and Being a Free Man," Mind 80 (1971): 199-200.
- 15 Isaiah Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty, pp. 122-123.
- 16 Ibid., p. liv.
- 17 H.L.A. Hart, "Between Utility and Rights," in The Idea of Freedom, ed. Alan Ryan; Ronald Dworkin and Bryan Magee, "Philosophy and Politics," in Men of Ideas, ed. Bryan Magee (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1978), p. 255.
- 18 Stephen Toulmin, "Reasons and Causes," in Explanation and the Behavioural Sciences, ed. Robert Borger and Frank Cioffi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 15.
- 19 "I chose X" implies "I am (at least partly) responsible for having done X"; but the reverse relation does not hold. If I accidentally kill someone while driving negligently then I can be held responsible for killing him even though I did not actually choose to do so; but even here responsibility necessarily depends on the existence of other choices on my part that are causally linked to the killing. Thus the attribution of responsibility might hinge on the fact that I had chosen to drink a good deal of alcohol, even though I knew I was going to drive soon afterwards.
- 20 This passage is quoted in Felix Oppenheim, Dimensions of Freedom, p. 177.
- 21 P.F. Strawson, "Social Morality and Individual Ideal," in P.F. Strawson, Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays (London: Methuen & Co., 1974), pp. 26-44.
- 22 John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 31. Rawls is talking about intuitionistic conceptions of justice when he uses these words, but they capture the general intuitionistic position very nicely.
- 23 Ronald Dworkin, Taking Rights Seriously, pp. 266-272.
- 24 J.S. Mill, On Liberty (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1956), p. 56.
- 25 Ronald Dworkin, Taking Rights Seriously, pp. 266-272.
- 26 Robert Nozick, who assumes the existence of a general right to freedom, has assimilated income taxation to forced labour (see





Anarchy, State and Utopia, p. 169). If we regard the promotion of the welfare of the poor as an important consideration in our moral deliberations then there will seem to us to be an important distinction between the two cases: income taxes can plausibly be regarded as essential to promoting the welfare of the poor, at least under normal conditions, whereas less disputable forms of forced labour certainly cannot. Nevertheless, if we make the assumption that a general right to liberty exists, even if we do not regard it as inviolable, then income taxation will appear to be an evil and Nozick's repugnance to it will seem reasonable if not entirely convincing. But if we deny that all freedoms have deep moral significance then this position looks far less impressive. Do we really regard the particular freedom to retain earned income, regardless of the deprivations of others, as morally important?

<sup>27</sup> R.S. Peters, Ethics and Education (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), pp. 179-180.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 180-182.

<sup>29</sup> An excellent discussion of rule-utilitarianism is provided by the articles of Urmson, Mabbot, Rawls and especially Smart in Theories of Ethics, ed. Phillipa Foot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 128-183.

<sup>30</sup> Ronald Dworkin, Taking Rights Seriously, pp. 201-202.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia, pp. 28-30.

<sup>32</sup> J.E. Moore, "The Conception of Intrinsic Value", in J.E. Moore, Philosophical Studies (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948), pp.253-275.

<sup>33</sup> Joel Feinberg, Social Philosophy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia, pp. 48-51.

<sup>35</sup> See Mary Midgley, Beasts and Men (London: Methuen & Co., 1980), pp. 203-317.

<sup>36</sup> Konrad Lorenz, On Aggression (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), pp. 109-138.

<sup>37</sup> Vinit Haksar, Liberty, Equality, and Perfectionism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 95-105.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia, pp. 149-182.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-33, 48-51, 309-312.

<sup>40</sup> Isaiah Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty, pp. 168-169.



<sup>41</sup> John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17.



## AUTONOMY

A superficial familiarity with contemporary ethics, or political or educational theory will reveal the pervasiveness of personal autonomy as an ideal of human character, at least among intellectuals. It seems to form part -- an especially important part -- of a configuration of notions each of which has enormous intuitive importance for us: freedom, individuality, self-realization and respect. We naturally think of autonomy as a characteristic of persons which is essential to the maintenance of a free society, and it would also seem to be a prerequisite of individuality and self-realization as these are commonly conceived. Certain forms of morally degrading conduct appear to be objectionable because they are attempts to seriously impede a human being in the exercise of autonomy or in transcending the limitations of heteronomy -- indoctrination, for example, or excessive paternalism. As I have described them here, these conceptual connections are still pretty hazy. One use of an analysis of autonomy, and one criterion of its adequacy, is that it should help us to begin elaborating them in a clear and plausible way.

As a property of certain political communities autonomy has a pretty clear meaning. A state is autonomous when the exercise of political power within it is not dictated by anyone outside it. (Less ideally we might ascribe autonomy to communities in which political power is possessed by some external element only to an insignificant degree.) This idea is not philosophically problematic in so far as we can attach a clear and important sense to the idea of a community being completely or very nearly immune to political





influence from outside. However, special problems arise when we apply the concept to individuals rather than states. The autonomous self is apparently independent in some sense analogous to that in which the autonomous nation is self-governing. This independence appears to involve a high degree of immunity to at least certain external influences. In the political context, the identification of the relevant extrinsic influences is a straight-forward matter, but in the case of personal autonomy it is far from immediately obvious what these external factors are. For those such as B.F. Skinner,<sup>1</sup> who emphasize the massive social influences which enter into the thought and action of any human being, the idea of personal autonomy is likely to appear as an absurd invention of the philosophical imagination. Furthermore, political autonomy is compatible with the most grossly irrational forms of self-government whereas personal autonomy would seem to be quite intimately connected with the use of reason. This connection has been a focus of attention for many contemporary philosophers of education; but its treatment has not, I suggest, been entirely satisfactory.

The phrase "personal autonomy" does not exhibit a highly stable pattern of use in either theoretical or ordinary discourse which one could simply describe and then approve, for philosophical purposes, with minor alterations at most; but neither does it provide one with a conceptual tabula rasa upon which he can inscribe whatever sense he chooses. Clearly, what we have is an idea which is not without substance but still relatively inchoate. The relation of autonomy to the concept of freedom, for instance, can be described in its broad outlines by a fairly sophisticated user of the language.



However, to talk of this relation in any detail compels one to partly create its meaning. Success in shaping the concept of autonomy will ultimately be determined by whether or not the analysis which emerges proves to be a useful tool in dealing with the substantive theoretical problems to which it is related. For our purposes, the substantive problem is this: can autonomy be elucidated as an ideal of character which provides a basis for a more significant life than other ideals? If so does its flourishing require a form of life which we would affirm upon reflection to be free?

I am going to approach this task rather indirectly by first discussing in some detail the concept of interest. In my account of the general notion of the self, which is presupposed by the specific idea of an autonomous self, the concept of interest will play a central role; and it will yield a crucial connection between selfhood and the significance of a human life. The details of the analysis will also be relevant in the following chapter, when the liberal conception of education will be discussed.

### Interests And The Self

The concept of interest I want to deal with is not the one that is employed when we speak of what is in the interest of so and so. What is in my interest are those things which, roughly speaking, further my personal well-being. This normative idea is to be contrasted with a range of uses of "interest" which are purely descriptive in character. If I say that I am interested in X I am classifying certain feelings I am inclined to have. These feelings



may or may not be conducive to my personal well-being. I shall argue that to profess an interest, in this sense, involves making a certain sort of value judgement; but in professing it one is nonetheless simply describing his own activity of mind. Given that I am not self-deceived as to my own mental states I cannot be in error as to what I am interested in. Given the same self-knowledge I can still be very much mistaken as to what is in my interests.

It will be useful to make a distinction here between occurrent and dispositional characteristics of mind since it will recur intermittently throughout the chapter. For example, as human beings we are liable to feel a desire for the esteem of others, for affection, and so on. When these feelings are upon us we have occurrent desires; but even when they are not we can still ascribe to ourselves dispositional desires for esteem, affection, etc. because we are prone to have these feelings. In a somewhat similar way, we can distinguish between feeling and being interested. Since the latter presupposes the former -- or at least the expectation that the former will occur under certain conditions -- it will be sensible to begin by looking at the logically more basic idea.

What does it mean to feel interested in something? Quite obviously, it involves being attracted to some object -- a possible course of action, a person, a theory -- in such a way that one feels like giving it one's attention and effort in appropriate ways. What counts as appropriate will be loosely determined by the object of the interest. One can think of a range of activity, more or less determinate, that is appropriate if one wants to indulge a feeling of interest in moral philosophy: reading certain books, pondering





and discussing ethical problems in a philosophical manner, attending lectures and seminars on the subject, and so forth. These activities are conceptually linked to moral philosophy in that an interest in the discipline can only be expressed through engagement in them. If someone does not feel like doing any of these things he necessarily does not feel interested in moral philosophy.

The expression of feelings of interest requires the direction of conscious mental activity towards the object which elicits them. That is why it is apposite to speak of attention and effort as characteristic of the various forms of expression. We can contrast interests, in this respect, with mere liking. I may like Jones while being consistently bored in his presence. I might regard him as a fine person without feeling in the least inclined to think about him or seek out his company. Likings can be sustained when their object is persistently taken for granted or ignored. The same is not true of interests, dispositional or occurrent. Admittedly, the expression of a liking may occasionally require effort and attention but the nature of the mental engagement is necessarily different than in the case of interest. If I say "I rather like Shelley's poetry but it has never really interested me (i.e., provoked feelings of interest)" the intelligibility of my statement clearly depends on a distinction in the degree to which an object might evoke one's energies and emotions. Evidently Shelley is the sort of poet I might read to wile away an hour, but he's not one I have ever felt like studying intently. Likings would appear to be of less importance in a person's life, at least from his own perspective, than his interests because they do not involve the same depth of mental



engagement.

What I have said so far is perfectly consistent with the analysis of the concept of interest which A.R. White outlined some years ago and was subsequently used by a number of British writers in attacking or defending the notion of child-centred education.<sup>2</sup> But there is an important missing element in the analysis as it stands. To feel interested there has to be at least an inclination to commend, in a certain sense, what one feels interested in. A difference exists -- a subtle but important one -- between saying that I feel tempted and saying that I feel interested in hurting someone who has hurt me. In both cases I am admitting that I feel attracted to a certain course of action; but "tempted" and "interested" imply different evaluations of the object of attraction. Quite clearly, the former expresses disapproval: what we conceive to be the good inspires but it does not tempt. The evaluation implied by "interested" is doubtless weaker, but there is surely at least an implicit admission that I feel like commending the course of action I contemplate. Married men who feel interested in having an affair are not simply attracted by the idea of extra-marital sex. Their belief in monogamy is also at least a bit shaky.

Let's turn our attention now to the dispositional aspect of the concept. As I suggested earlier, a sort of proneness is involved here. My occurrent feeling of interest as I listen to the music of Bach on the radio is part of a much larger pattern in my mental life. Similar feelings directed to the same composer's music have been a recurrent part of my experience for quite some time and have motivated actions which serve to elicit them again and again -- e.g., buying



certain records, attending certain concerts. It is partly in virtue of this general pattern in my mental life and my expectation that it will continue that I can claim to be interested in Bach's music, even when I do not currently feel interested in it. A dispositional interest will manifest itself in a recurrent pattern of mental activity, composed of intermittent feelings of interest and inclinations to act in ways which sustain these feelings. Admittedly, one could claim to be interested in something even though one had experienced only one occurrence of a feeling of interest; but the claim could be true only if one expected these feelings to recur in the future as a result of pursuing the interest, and only if one felt inclined to pursue it. That is to say, one would have to believe that his feeling of interest marked the beginning of the relevant sort of mental pattern.

But it won't do to analyse these dispositions merely as a proneness to feelings of interest. Imagine that I have undergone a religious conversion in consequence of which I have repudiated philosophy as the work of the devil. However, I am still prone to feel interested in philosophy. Against my better nature I am apt to find myself drawn to some philosophical puzzle; and though I sincerely denounce such experiences afterwards, while I am going through them I feel slightly inclined to think that philosophy is really quite an innocent activity. Now despite this proneness could I not sincerely deny being interested in philosophy when my better self is in control? For although these feelings of attraction to philosophy are experienced as feelings of interest when they occur, my settled attitude towards them is that they are simply temptations.





Therefore I can claim that philosophy is not one of my interests in the way that my hobbies are and, at a more fundamental level, in the way that my religion is.<sup>3</sup> I have already argued that feelings of interest imply that one is at least inclined to make a positive value judgement about the object of one's feelings; and now it would seem that dispositional interests entail a rather fuller commitment to a judgement of this sort. In the example just considered I do not believe that philosophy is a commendable pursuit, even though I am subject to occasional faint doubts on the matter; and for that reason I can honestly say that philosophy is no longer an interest of mine.<sup>4</sup>

What sort of belief do I imply when I confess to be interested in something? The general form which its propositional content will take, where the object of interest is not a particular course of action,<sup>5</sup> might be made explicit as follows: "It is sometimes worthwhile for me to do those things which I am apt to feel like doing as a result of my attraction to this object (i.e., the object of my interest)." What one is apt to feel like doing, of course, are at least some of those things which can appropriately express feelings of interest in the particular object. The issue of what one takes to be suitable occasions for expression is a complicated one. Whenever one feels like doing so is the obvious but wrong answer. As we shall see, dispositional interests will form part of an inter-related system of interests and other propensities. What counts as a suitable occasion for expressing an interest will depend on its relation to other elements in the system. For example, the feelings of attraction to which a relatively superficial interest gives rise may disrupt



the pursuit of more fundamental concerns if they are indulged every time they occur; and so whenever they threaten to be disruptive in this way they can rightly be regarded as feelings of temptation rather than interest.

The idea of finding something worthwhile for oneself which is relevant here is easily misunderstood so I had better explain it. It will help if we consider how this evaluation applies in a particular dispositional interest. There is a distinction to be made between being interested in a science per se and valuing it merely as a means to the realization of something else that is valued for itself. A diligent researcher who sees his work simply as a route to money and status is not, strictly speaking, interested in science at all. The value he finds in it has nothing to do with the inherent nature of the discipline; it is based exclusively upon certain contingent facts about the pursuit of scientific research in our society. It is true that we sometimes use the word "interest" very loosely, to refer to just about anything that is of concern to us, without conceptual restrictions upon the grounds for our concern; but just as surely we often contrast what truly or ultimately interests us with those things that engage us merely because we have these more basic preoccupations. Thus for someone who was really interested in scientific research, in the sense that interests me, what we would expect is some passion for scientific truth itself, a passion independent of its personal utility, and a capacity to find satisfaction within the process of scientific inquiry and discovery. That is to say, scientific activity will be a source of intrinsically rewarding experiences. These may not be describable



in hedonistic terms because what makes an activity inherently fulfilling for human beings is often difficult to capture with the idea of pleasure alone. The travails of Wittgenstein when writing his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus make it ludicrous to say that he found philosophy a pleasant activity, but his agonies do not justify us in claiming that the discipline was therefore uninteresting or even less interesting to him. The crucial point for our analysis is this: to be interested in an activity such as science or philosophy, whether the value one finds therein is exclusively hedonistic or not, at least part of what makes it personally worthwhile must be internal features of the discipline rather than contingent facts about it. I only say "at least part" because his belief in the personal value of research is very likely to be also partly grounded on extrinsic considerations. He may see his activity as instrumentally valuable in a number of ways and, unless he is a rather extraordinary human being, he will want the projects he undertakes to satisfy certain conditions of extrinsic acceptability as well, regardless of the intrinsic attractions they might hold. A morally committed scientist will not be interested in nuclear research if he is convinced that its pursuit would be disastrous for mankind. Prudential as well as moral considerations will be relevant here, and so too will religious ones for those who acknowledge their force. (We shall meet others later on, but we need not bother about them here.) It should be noted that for those who are not even capable of appreciating criteria of extrinsic acceptability -- young children and mental defectives -- interest seems to require nothing more than a sort of brute attraction. Talk of a supervening value judgement is out of





place here.

I want to point now to a connection between the expression of one's interests and self-realization or the achievement of a meaningful life. The connection I make will be through the idea of the personal or felt significance of one's experience. It is possible that an existence which is morally inadequate could nonetheless be experienced as having deep personal significance, but we would not want to infer from this psychological fact that this life really is deeply significant when viewed objectively. That inference would presuppose a moral approval which could not be warranted in this case. But the notions of personal and objective existential significance are normally very closely related in our moral thinking. Thus if one maintained that the felt quality of a life were irrelevant to determining its objective significance one would be adopting a strikingly inhumane view. Where a man is racked by a sense of the pointlessness of it all we do not want to say: "Now that's a meaningful life!" Perhaps such a statement would be acceptable if it were construed as a claim that some achievable change of outlook or conduct would make his life a deeply or tolerably meaningful one, despite his present angst. In that case the statement would be defensible by argument which showed that the individual's present circumstances contain a potential for personal fulfilment which he presently seems unaware of. But this shows that the statement would be rather misleading in this form since what one really wants to say, to express the idea precisely, is this: "Your life could be significant if only you would look at things a bit differently and act accordingly." The point I want to emphasize is this: to regard



a person with moral concern, as this perspective is commonly conceived, is to recognize that how the individual sees the value of his own experience is of crucial importance in determining its objective value. Therefore if I am haunted by despair, if I can see no value in my existence, the moral concern of others will bid them to change my attitude or the circumstances that provoked it. At the very least, we can say that a necessary condition of a meaningful life is that it is generally and confidently felt to be such by the person who lives it. And where there is nothing to choose, morally speaking, between two lives the superior of the two will surely be that which yields the stronger sense of value.

If we adopt this moral outlook towards others then it becomes obvious why an individual's interests, and particularly the more central dispositional interests, are such an enormously important constituent of the self. Consider what is involved in losing an interest that has been an especially engrossing part of one's experience for some time, and let us suppose that its loss does not result from some emerging interest which immediately fills the gap of what is lost. Things to which you gave effort and attention to in the assurance that they were intrinsically worthwhile now seem worthless. A dispositional interest, by definition, entails a belief in the inherent value of doing certain things with one's life, and so to lose one that has been a fairly central personal preoccupation is necessarily to feel the significance of one's life seriously diminished. In the aftermath of such a loss you may not know, in a quite literal sense, what to do with yourself. Perhaps a more common phenomenon is to find oneself unable to give adequate expression



to some deeply held interest, and in the frustration of failing to do so here again we recognize what is necessarily felt as a more or less grievous loss in the significance of one's life. "I no longer have any interest in life": that is to say, "Life no longer has any meaning for me." In that predicament it is still logically possible for me to want certain things because wants can emanate from sources other than interests. I am liable to want eggs for breakfast tomorrow morning because I rather like them, but they do not interest me in the least. However, though the indulgence of our tastes is an agreeable embellishment to a life in which we can sustain a satisfactory level of interest, when that situation is no longer our good fortune the slight charm we find in such indulgence is likely to evaporate.

Thus it is plausible, from a certain moral viewpoint, to locate the core of the self in a system of dispositional interests, more or less harmoniously inter-related. For the wants which reflect this system bring the individual into a personally significant relationship with the world to the extent that they are satisfied and untoward consequences do not follow. These wants will include those which have as their direct object something that is internal to the pursuit of this or that interest -- e.g., I want to read a certain article in the library tomorrow and this want reflects my interest in philosophy since that disposition explains my desire. The underlying system will also be reflected in wants which have as their direct object the realization of conditions which facilitate or make possible engagement in this or that interest. My desire to visit the library tomorrow is of this sort. The satisfaction of





wants derived from other propensities may also enhance the personal significance of one's life; but they will normally do so to a lesser degree, given the priority we naturally attach to our interests.

The development of a human being's system of interests and the way this shapes his wants, and hence his conduct, in interaction with other propensities are mental processes that are subject to reason. These are aspects of our lives in which we can do better or worse as we reason well or ill. This brings us to the first condition of autonomy. I suggest that the autonomous self is to be partly distinguished from others by a level of rationality at which the system of interests is developed in a realistic fashion and wants are formed and acted upon in the same spirit. The notion of realism here is pretty obscure as it stands but properly elucidated it seems to me to capture much of the contrast between reasons as it functions in the autonomous personality and its role in the life of the heteronomous chooser, where a great deal of fantasy -- i.e., a failure to face the real world or the real self -- may still obtain.

### The Realistic Mind

It is rational for any human being to be actively concerned that his interests taken together, and given the relevant facts about his nature and external circumstances, provide a good chance of being successfully expressed and thus welded into a personally meaningful life. By an active concern I mean one that informs the individual's thought and action in a serious effort to ensure that his interests really do meet this condition. The successful pursuit of one's



interests will depend upon whether the occurrent desires to which they give rise can be satisfied and upon whether short-term satisfaction does not bring long-term frustration. If a man's desires turn out to be a bundle of disappointed wishes or if their immediate satisfaction simply brings weightier evils in its wake then very little in the way of a personally meaningful life is possible. To be indifferent to whether or not that is one's fate is irrational if anything is. Just try to imagine a human being whom you would call rational who was genuinely unconcerned about this matter.

It is hardly controversial that a reasonable man will have the concern I have described, but there might still be some puzzlement as to what one could actually do about it. For one cannot, by a fiat of the will, acquire or extinguish an interest any more than one can change his height by the same means. There is an absurdity in the behaviour of a teacher who commands his pupils to be interested in Shakespeare which he does not evince when he merely orders them to pay attention. Commands only make sense when what is commanded can be brought about by a direct act of will. Interest is just not that sort of thing. Therefore the formation of a person's interests may seem to be a matter of things that happen to him rather than things he actually does; and so whether the desires that reflect one's interest turn out to be preposterous wishes or reasonable wants would appear to be a matter of good or bad luck rather than good or bad reasoning. Now this view is unacceptable because it depends on a false dichotomy of events in our lives into things that are the direct objects of acts of will and things that simply befall us. It is true that one cannot, for instance, just choose to believe



such and such: belief cannot be the immediate aim of any volition. But neither does it make sense to talk of a human being's beliefs as given facts about him, like his height or mortality, which he can do nothing about. Beliefs are the product of mental activities which are to a large extent within the control of the believer.

A man can make a conscious effort to face disagreeable facts or to engage in wish-fulfilling fantasies instead, and the course he takes will have a deep influence on what he ultimately comes to believe.

We are all aware -- or should be -- of the extent to which our wishes about the world and ourselves can distort what we come to believe; and the extent of this distortion is not an immutable fact of normal human nature. We can do something about it. Thus there is a sense in which one might say, stretching language a bit, that our beliefs are in part chosen indirectly in so far as we choose to curb the natural tendency to fantasy. If that is so then the same element of choice will enter into the development of our interests because, as we have seen, these entail beliefs of a certain sort. Of course, if I have become convinced that I should repudiate as a temptation what I have hitherto held as an interest some residual attraction towards its object inevitably persists, but even that is something which we can normally arrest or sustain through the choices we make. We can passively indulge hankerings for what we have come to see as evil, imprudent, or futile or else we can channel our energies and attention into other interests; and to the extent that a personally meaningful life is thereby achieved, the attraction of what we know cannot or should not be done will correspondingly diminish.

I suspect that the main uses of reason in shaping an





appropriate system of interests are fairly obvious to any reasonable human being. After all, their use is part of what it means to be truly reasonable. Therefore, I shall not bore myself or my readers by describing them in detail. Instead I shall merely outline their salient features to illustrate the nature of that realism which I have claimed to be essential to autonomy.

In the first place, there must be a minimal level of concord within one's system of interests: serious conflicts have to be sedulously avoided and when they do arise, despite one's best efforts, a suitable resolution has to be promptly found and carried through. To try to maintain two radically opposing interests, for instance, is commonly to fall very painfully short from adequately expressing either of them and therefore to suffer the intense frustration that is inevitably involved in a double loss of this sort. In such a situation it would be unreasonable to passively endure the conflict: I either repudiate one interest or else alter them in some fundamental way so that a tolerable life becomes possible. But we can see how the tendency to fantasy is still likely to be strong here since what confronts me is the sad fact that I cannot have the best of both worlds when I passionately wish that I could; and the tendency will often be strong enough to prevent one from doing what reason would prescribe. Where one has the strength to face up to such conflicts for what they are we can see how a sort of hard-headed realism is also essential to their resolution: one has to discern his own priorities clearly, anticipate without gratifying illusions how possible resolutions may affect himself and others, and see how he may limit the damage that must be done.



Furthermore, our interests have to be regulated in the light of an accurate appraisal of our temperament, abilities and external circumstances. These factors provide a framework that defines what can feasibly be striven for, and to understand them adequately is of the utmost importance to us. To see them as more restrictive than they really are may lead one to curb his interests needlessly; and to seriously overestimate the latitude one has is to incur all the risks of unreasonable aspirations. However, it should be emphasized that it would be irrational for a human being to try to avoid all risks of failure by limiting his interests to what can be pursued with the virtual certainty of success. A preoccupation with safety and security at all costs will normally require an extremely extensive rejection of that which naturally attracts us; and so what one is left with is a life in which one's interests are satisfied but only at the expense of denying virtually all the promptings of one's nature.

Now for moral persons there is one interest which it would be unreasonable for them to adjust merely to ensure a more personally meaningful existence. I assume that such individuals are distinguished by a moral interest which occupies an especially fundamental position in their scheme of values. This will be argued more fully below. The expression of any interest which is an important constituent of the self will normally enhance the felt quality of one's experience provided that conditions are favourable for its expression; but circumstances are not always propitious and so the pursuit of the moral interest may generate frustrated desires and require sacrifices relative to one's other goals and ideals which are very painful.



In adverse circumstances it may be thought reasonable, given our concern to enjoy a personally significant life, to suppress the moral interest so as to avoid the grief it may bring us. But reason certainly does not prescribe this suppression. If an individual were exclusively concerned with the felt quality of his experience he would simply be a rather odd example of egotism. I say "rather odd" because even most egotists, I suspect, would balk at the prospect of being permanently plugged into an experience machine that could induce any desired mental state. The desires of moral persons go beyond (though they certainly include) concern about the felt significance of their lives, and in this respect they are not remarkable. Thus it would be a bizarre and arbitrary conception of rationality which entailed that only those who subordinated all else to this concern were truly reasonable. From the viewpoint of those who are interested in being moral it will be reasonable, though regrettable, to incur whatever psychological losses this may involve in particular instances. However, this does not make what I have said about the rational adjustment of interests irrelevant to the morally virtuous. The moral interest will normally exist alongside others which, if unnecessary dissatisfaction is to be avoided, must be brought into line with the entire system of interests and adjusted to one's nature and external circumstances.

The utility of reason in shaping a personally or objectively meaningful life may be traced in somewhat different ways in the determination of our occurrent wants. The formation of the underlying system of interests, as the most important source of our desires, is obviously relevant here; but other factors have to be taken account





of as well. In the particular situations we find ourselves a knowledge of efficient means to achieve our ends must be brought to bear in shaping our wants. The pursuit of our various interests also has to be ordered so that we are not pulled hither and thither by conflicting inclinations which make impossible any sustained effort and hence any achievement which requires it. Furthermore, human beings are subject to other sorts of attraction than those prompted by their interests and these too will play a part in determining our wants. The serious problem here, of course, is posed by our temptations.

To understand the use of reason in this area it is crucial to distinguish two senses of "want" or "desire". If I feel tempted to do what I know to be wrong there is clearly a sense in which I desire to do what temptation urges me to. The experience of wanting or desiring in this sense is very like something that just happens to me: after all, I cannot help feeling tempted from time to time to act contrary to what I know to be best. The development of a realistic system of interests will help to limit such feelings but they cannot be completely forestalled. But there is another, more interesting meaning of "want" which is my concern here. This concept applies not to just any desire a man might have but to what he most desires in the particular situation he finds himself. We might ask a frightened soldier, on the eve of a battle, if he wanted to avoid fighting; and he could sincerely deny that he did despite the intensity of his desire to beat a hasty retreat. This is conceivable since it is possible that what he desires most of all, in the situation he finds himself, is to live up to his military obligations. That



is what he wants. These desires -- and they are the morally interesting ones since they are what motivate our actions -- certainly are subject to rational control.

How is this possible? An illuminating way of describing the experience of succumbing to temptation is to say that we lost sight of what we truly valued; and we naturally think of this sort of lapse as something we can be held responsible for. One cannot help feeling attracted sometimes to what is evil or imprudent but one can normally prevent the disregard of our moral and prudential concerns which these feelings often lead us to. Indeed, one can often remember a moment when he quite deliberately lost sight of these interests, turning his mind away from them so that the object of temptation can be contemplated without misgivings. In other words, one can allow a state of mind to come into being in which what one most desires is what he feels tempted to do. The struggle of resisting temptation is simply the attempt to prevent this mental state from arising by focusing attention upon those interests to which it runs counter. Although prayer may have certain metaphysical demerits, the value that religious people attach to it reflects the important fact that it is only by a sort of mental discipline, an orientation of the mind toward the objects of our higher aspirations which does not always come naturally to us, that we can consistently live in a way that fulfills these aspirations. Of course this discipline, which is the source of our strength of will, is not a simple innate or learned capacity which we can just employ or discard as we please: its effectiveness at any given moment will depend greatly upon the extent to which one has seriously



and habitually exercised it in the past. But through its exercise we ensure that our dominant desires are in line with our basic interests. We choose, albeit indirectly, to want what we would want upon reflection. Not to do this is a failure of reason. More precisely it is a failure of that realistic vision which I previously argued is essential to maintaining an adequate system of interests. For in giving way to what one recognizes as a temptation, one's dominant desire -- i.e., the want which is the immediate explanation of his action -- has been formed in a consciousness in which the self is no longer seen for what it is because the natural priority of one's interests has been temporarily lost sight of.

The use of reason in curbing temptation is not exclusively of interest in the moral aspect of our lives because I do not use the word "temptation" in an exclusively moral sense. Even the rational amoralist will have a system of interests, more or less coherently inter-related, and conflicts can be expected to arise fairly regularly between these basic constituents of the self and more superficial elements. The disciplined cultivation of some talent he has, for instance, will often require that he see the promptings of superficial interests and likings as temptations and suppress them as such in the formation of his dominant desires; otherwise the talent will not be perfected in the way that he would want upon reflection. If we assume that the requisite level of concord has been achieved between my various interests and that they have been brought into line with external circumstances and so forth, then it will be unreasonable for me to give in to temptations except perhaps on rare and trivial occasions. Giving way to what one would regard on





reflection as a serious evil, say, means acting in a way that is radically at variance with some especially central interest. This is an unreasonable trade-off to make, given one's own system of values, for in that context it is far more important to express one's basic interests adequately than to secure whatever temporary satisfaction might be secured through submitting to an evil.

The situation here is complicated a bit by the human capacity for self-deception. Occasionally, it is possible to submit to temptation while avoiding some of its adverse consequences by not recognizing one's lapse for what it is. By deceiving oneself it becomes possible to enjoy both the satisfaction of succumbing and the satisfaction of believing that one's life fully accords with what one professes, at least, to be his basic interests. A man who feels his life to be profoundly meaningful partly because he lives with the illusion that he is saintly might also, if the truth were known, owe a good deal of that feeling to the indulgence of unconscious sadistic tendencies. Thus in so far as one is concerned with the felt quality of one's experience self-deception might seem like a useful strategy to adopt from time to time. For moral beings there is an absolutely decisive objection to this: what interests them is actually living, and not merely feeling that they live, morally commendable lives. Therefore rationalizations about their moral lapses, however painful it might be to squarely face them as real failures, is necessary if they are to live as they aspire to. But even from a non-moral viewpoint the case for this sort of duplicity is very weak. It is a mistake to think of self-deception as a strategy one might deliberately use now and then, as if a rational



being could employ it selectively in the light of carefully formed expectations as to the consequences of doing so. Self-deception cannot be deliberate: the logic of the concept precludes consciousness of its true nature. "I recognize that I did wrong but since I shall feel better if I convince myself otherwise that is precisely what I shall do". This would be a preposterous thing to say because in consciously recognizing the mechanism of self-deception for what it is we make the deception impossible. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which one might cultivate it as an habitual mental tendency, though it would have to be one that operates beyond conscious control. It is always possible not to make the effort to be self-critical of ourselves and to invent specious reasons, without explicitly recognising them as specious, for regarding our lapses as harmless diversions. But since this process cannot be consciously regulated to suit our needs it is a dangerous business. Today it may protect us from disagreeable facts. Tomorrow it may insulate us from truths that are essential to our well-being. Self-deception is merely one way of losing control over our lives. It is very like falling asleep while driving. One's dreams may be pleasant but the risks are hardly worth it.

As I noted earlier, the idea of autonomy is very closely linked to that of self-government or self-direction. We are apt to think of the autonomous as individuals who can control their lives in a way that others in like circumstances cannot. Even when subject to unfavourable external conditions they are not passively swept along by the tide of events. Now suppose an individual's rationality is sufficiently developed for him to count as a chooser but he still



falls short of the level of practical reason which I have been describing in this section. There is a sense in which such a person might be described as lacking in self-government when compared with more thoroughly reasonable individuals. Within his system of interests, for example, one might find a radical incompatibility between certain basic components -- between, say, his commitment to a particular personal relationship and a particular religious ideal -- which he believes he is powerless to resolve. More commonly, perhaps, his interests will be out of joint with his external circumstances, temperament, or abilities even where these have the potential to provide a profoundly meaningful existence. His deepest values are the stuff of frustrated longings, not of reasonable expectations. Here again we see how the individual sees himself as incapable, and therefore is incapable, of changing his life so as to make it more personally significant, even though the external conditions for doing so may be very favourable. He conceives his system of interests as a virtually unalterable fact of his existence to be passively endured and changed, if changed at all, through accident rather than volition. The same relative powerlessness will be evident in the formation of his wants. As a chooser, he is capable of evaluating his desires rationally and thereby forming the wants upon which he acts in a rational fashion. He has the capacity to distinguish temptations and so forth from the promptings of his dispositional interests. But the mental discipline that is necessary to act habitually in the light of this knowledge is often lacking, and though self-deception may protect him from some of the ill-effects of his lapses this is a strategy that is likely to bring him more





harm than good. Looking at these various aspects of a mind that barely satisfies the conditions of being a chooser and comparing them with the characteristic mental life of individuals at the higher level, we can see why the latter may be seen as possessing a capacity for self-government which others lack. This is evident in so far as they do not exhibit the passivity of the minimally rational chooser in shaping their interests and occurrent wants; and their firm grasp upon reality gives them a control of their lives which others, more or less lost in a fog of self-deception, cannot share. Thus it seems plausible to say that part of the self-government of autonomous individuals consists in the fact that they characteristically function at the higher level of practical reason. The idea of realism allows us to connect autonomy with the ideas of self-rule and rationality in an intuitively appealing way. But there is a further aspect to the self-rule of autonomy which will be examined in the following section.

### The Independent Mind

One of the deepest and most pervasive of human concerns is that which we have in eliciting from others favourable attitudes and feelings and in avoiding the unfavourable ones. With some sacrifice of accuracy for brevity, I shall call this the approval desire; and the various attitudes and feelings that are its object will be referred to as approval or positive regard. Closely related to this is the powerful human impulse to "belong", to feel at one with the world through some personal relationship or set of such relationships.



This will be called the social desire.

As I have described them here, these are extremely abstract dispositional desires which comprehend a vast and enormously varied range of mental phenomena; but they are nonetheless useful in the analysis of autonomy. The various specific desires which fall within these categories are obvious means by which our own personal fulfilment comes to be bound up with the lives of other human beings; and equally obviously, these desires are a means by which others may come to govern our lives in oppressive ways. Autonomy, it would appear, implies that these desires are controlled in ways which can be psychologically difficult. If I try to think of paradigms of autonomous conduct what springs to mind are individuals capable of allegiance to certain deeply held values despite condemnation and isolation. Social defiance is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of autonomy; but it is natural to think of that ideal as requiring a mind that is not merely realistic but also socially independent in a way that gives the individual a potential for non-conformity.

The level of rationality described in the previous section does necessitate a certain sort of independent-mindedness. Realism presupposes a fairly developed capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood, without relying simply on the testimony of others; but the practical deliberations of such a being might still be dominated by the desire to be approved by certain others and to feel at one with them. As such, his mind remains locked in a sort of social dependence. If one surveys the range of human character which we would normally regard as heteronomous it also becomes apparent that



any attempt to analyse heteronomy exhaustively in terms of a lack of realism will be unsuccessful. After all, heteronomy may be shown by people who just value a comfortable life, with the social integration and approval it involves, far more than any interest that might be held in defiance of the world; and we might also regard as heteronomous the more ruthless timeserver who knowingly adjusts his conduct to whatever is socially approved in order to secure personal advancement. Even though the idea of a free society is still an obscure one in many ways it is pretty clear that these two personality types, along with that of the unreasonable chooser, are likely to be highly congruent with the demands of life in an unfree society. Individuals who fit these types will be especially receptive to the requirements of social conformity so that even where these requirements have become inordinate they are likely to simply adjust to them, and by doing so they will reinforce the oppressive institutions they live under. However else we may differ about the nature of autonomy we are pretty sure it is not a personality type in perfect harmony with the restrictions of any closed society.

How, then, are we to describe the place of the approval and social desires in the autonomous personality? It will be convenient to answer this question in two parts by looking at the place of these dispositions in the moral and then in the non-moral aspect of human life. The first task is really inseparable from the larger problem of moral motivation so I will deal with it in that context.

According to Kant moral autonomy is manifest only in acts of practical reason upon which the sentiments and inclinations that affect us as phenomenal beings have no influence. The morally





autonomous individual acts out of a pure respect for the moral law. There is, however, one form of social desire that is intrinsic to Kantian autonomy: the desire for oneness in a Kingdom of Ends where all men are united through the reciprocal respect that is their due as rational beings. But anything less rarified than this austere sense of human solidarity has no legitimate place in moral judgement.<sup>6</sup>

What is most striking about this picture is how utterly at variance it is with serious commonsense. Moral virtue, as something we are fairly well acquainted with in our daily lives, is so deeply embedded in our capacity to care and our need to be cared about that any moral ideal which enjoins a drastic detachment from our ordinary inclinations and sentiments is likely to be morally disastrous. The severe and highly intellectual commitment to human solidarity of the Kantian self-legislator is by itself just too thin a soil for real moral concern to flourish in. In our intimate personal relations moral excellence will very commonly require a judicious expression of approval; and even in dealing with beings outside this select circle virtue is commonly exhibited in a sort of unsentimental, positive regard which is close to human love. Gregory Vlastos has pointed out how moral concern resembles paternal love in its capacity to remain constant irrespective of the merits or demerits of its object.<sup>7</sup> In its emotional quality too the analogy to human love is an extremely illuminating one. This is perhaps most clearly evident in individuals whose moral excellence is truly extraordinary -- certain saints, for instance. For such beings, "love" is a word they quite naturally use, without exaggeration, to express their moral attitude to others. Lesser mortals are more than a little insincere when



they ape such claims; but they recognize the moral saint as an ideal which, to the extent that their lives are morally commendable, they must approximate in a modest way. Moral concern, as we naturally conceive it, is not an abstract reverence for transcendent law but a way of relating to other human beings which is often barely distinguishable from just really caring about them. Now the psychological difficulty in consistently showing this concern, as opposed to a mere fitful sympathy, is considerable; and for a being whose moral deliberations really are a matter of transcendent reason (whatever that might be), impervious to the promptings of the social and approval desires, the difficulties involved here will probably be immense. Unless one recognizes a need within oneself to be the object of positive regard and to feel at one with others it will surely be extraordinarily difficult to appreciate the importance of that need in others, and therefore extremely difficult to act in the morally appropriate ways which meet that need. A detached being of this sort might be more capable of some morally excellent acts than ordinary mortals would. They might find it especially easy to steel themselves against a hostile world if they became convinced that it was morally required, but they will be ill-equipped for less heroic moral demands.

Any stark opposition between the everyday forms of the social and approval desires and moral autonomy is much too simple. However, it would also be a grave mistake to suppose that moral motivation is inevitably compatible with these desires. Sometimes, regrettably, being moral demands that we incur the hostility of the world; and in a host of more mundane situations, it proves incompatible with the



fullest satisfaction of the social and approval desires. The maintenance of moral virtue when one is subject to these pressures obviously presupposes a rather powerful source of motivation which is somehow distinctive of morality. To clarify its nature it will help us if we look at what is involved in ascribing to someone the fairly central moral virtue of honesty. I chose this one pretty well at random -- courage, humility, compassion, would all serve just as well. What I hope to show is that in deciding whether or not someone is honest part of what we are looking for is a particular pattern of motivation in his conduct; and this pattern is a necessary condition of being honest, and more generally, of being a moral person.

It is not very difficult to see how important the issue of motivation is here, though our tendency to sometimes reduce virtues to simple regularities of conduct (e.g., "honesty is consistent, intentional truth-telling") obscures the point. Let us suppose that Jones, who is an impeccably consistent teller of the truth, acts "honestly" in a certain situation with the gleeful awareness that he will thereby cause enormous harm to another human being. The inverted commas in the previous sentence are appropriate for an obvious reason: *ex hypothesi*, Jones acted viciously, which means that he did not display a moral virtue. Admittedly, there is a legalistic level of moral awareness at which rules are conceived as inviolable moral laws. Someone whose thinking worked at this level might say with innocent admiration: "Jones really showed his honesty there". But for those of us who see simple rules of behaviour, such as that forbidding intentional deceit, merely as very rough guides to appropriate conduct this attitude will seem hopelessly naive. The







conceptions of moral concern which we have are generally much too complex to be captured in the idea of a single-minded adherence to certain easily statable behavioural norms, and there is a corresponding complexity in the way that we conceive the virtues.

Suppose that Smith is someone whom we believed to be a thoroughly honest person, but we find him telling a lie. Clearly one cannot say whether or not this incident should affect our appraisal of his character unless one knows a good deal more about the context in which the lapse occurred. Did he lie to prevent someone from being cruelly mistreated? Did he pretend to his wife that he had forgotten her birthday so that he could surprise her the next moment with a gift? Did he betray a friend for personal gain? With this sort of information we are in a better position to see what the motive behind Smith's deceit actually was; and this may or may not appear to warrant a re-appraisal of his character. If the detected motive is morally objectionable one might still have reason to see it as an uncharacteristic failure which does not warrant any change in our view of him as a basically honest man. But then again, we might have reason to utterly change our opinion of him: the motive from which he apparently acted suggests a marked change of character or perhaps it seems that we had misunderstood his character all along. He was never really an honest person: he just seemed to be one.

How could one justify an adverse re-appraisal of this sort? The most obviously relevant factor is the question of anticipated consequences.<sup>8</sup> One may lie in order to ridicule, to secure from another a favour they would otherwise withhold and have a right to



withhold, to disrupt his plans even though there is no evil in them, and so forth. These are the common motives of intentional deceit and they are evil because to act from such a motive is to act so as to bring about an evil. If someone lies with this sort of consequence in view he acts dishonestly and, other things being equal, the greater the anticipated evil the stronger the reason we have to think worse of his character. If the motive is really unforgivable a justified reaction would be something like this: "Anyone who could do that is just not interested (or not interested enough) in being moral. Therefore, he isn't really an honest person." Notice how apposite the word "interest" is here. The value which moral persons find in being moral is primarily intrinsic to that condition: they do not just care about the psychological side-benefits. As a matter of psychological fact, human beings are not just interested in their own psychological states but in affecting the world that lies beyond their consciousness in specific ways. They want to win games and make love and not merely to enjoy the feelings of victory and orgasm. The moral interest is a practical concern of this sort: its primary object is the realization of a certain conception of desirable human relations in our dealings with others. The interest also extends to its realization in the inter-personal relations of others; but its main focus, quite properly, is upon our own successes and failures. To merely contemplate the idea of the moral order with a spectator's fascination is not to show the relevant sort of disposition. Depraved professors of ethics do not fit the bill.

In a virtuous character the moral concern is not merely one among others. It occupies an especially central position in the basic



system of interests because its expression is not subject, as others are, to conditions of extrinsic acceptability. To be interested in playing tennis only so far as prudence dictates is to be sensible; but to be interested in being moral only so far as prudence dictates is to be a moral failure. In fact the moral interest will provide the most important measure of extrinsic acceptability, closely regulating the formation and pursuit of other interests. Its adequate expression requires the avoidance of conduct which involves treating others in morally objectionable ways, even when this means that the most powerful desires derived from other interests must remain unsatisfied. But that is not the whole story: a misanthropic hermit, living apart from the world, satisfies that condition more fully than most of us. I have assumed that a conception of desirable human relations, which emphasizes the need for a reciprocal concern or respect that is close to human love, is intrinsic to the moral viewpoint. A moral character implies not just a commitment to avoid conduct at variance with its realization but also a determination to actually realize it, though perhaps with only approximate success, in our own lives.

We are in a better position now to describe the place which the social and approval desires can have in a morally commendable character. In the first place, and on the positive side, we can see that these desires are important in the deliberative process of determining what moral excellence requires of us. We can see that their satisfaction within ourselves is so crucial for the achievement of a personally significant life, and with a little empathy we can detect the same need in others and act appropriately in the light of





this knowledge. Of course, a refined moral awareness will also alert us to how different others are from us, but notice that these disparities will very often be variants of the social and approval desires. Well-intentioned moral disasters are much more likely to occur when people really are very different in their systems of interests: e.g., where individuals from radically different cultures come into conflict. To resolve such conflicts it will often be important to recognize the very general desires, such as a desire for oneness with a culture in which one has been raised, which underlie our differences. Without that awareness, it will be extremely difficult to appreciate the importance of those superficially alien interests which actually reflect our common humanity. Secondly, it is a fortunate fact that the expression of the moral interest will commonly coincide with the promptings of the social and approval desires. If they were constantly at variance the interest could hardly be expected to flourish. The researches of Piaget and Kohlberg, for instance, seem to show that what we would recognize as a mature moral concern presupposes that behaviour be first regulated in terms of various forms of the social and approval desires.<sup>9</sup> However, the need for approval, where others are morally mediocre and expect one to be the same, is likely to lead to morally mediocre conduct; and the need to belong to some tradition of religion or culture, where its content turns out to be morally flawed, is likely to lead to morally flawed conduct. So many social commentators have noted the peculiar levelling tendency of modern cultures. The pressure to conform produces what Heidegger calls the "they self",<sup>10</sup> a barely distinguishable fragment of an indeterminate public. The moral dangers implicit in this



process hardly need to be spelt out, and precisely the same dangers exist when the desire for conformity is directed to some dissenting group or individual. Authentic moral commitment requires that these pressures be resisted, and in this resistance we see an important dimension of autonomy or self-government. For even in unfavourable circumstances the moral interest, as the central constituent of the self, can guide the conduct of moral persons while others succumb to social pressures.

There is an analogue to moral authenticity in certain morally objectionable forms of life which has led some writers to maintain that moral virtue is not a necessary condition of autonomy.<sup>11</sup> For instance, it is easy to conceive of individuals in whose lives some quasi-aesthetic ideal of personal excellence occupies much the same place as the moral interest does in a virtuous life. Nietzschean "supermen", say, would fit this pattern. The approval and social desires in a character of this sort are subordinated, as they are in the case of moral persons, to the pursuit of an interest which is ultimately independent of them. Therefore, fidelity to that interest can be maintained even when the pressures of social conformity oppose it. In authentic moral or amoral characters the centrality of a certain interest which overrides concern for the benefits of conformity creates a similar sort of independence of mind. Whether we regard this species of amoralist as representing a type of autonomy or a degenerate analogue does not much matter. So far as my linguistic intuitions provide any guidance here it seems more natural to think of autonomy as a rather formal ideal of character, rather like resoluteness or self-control, which does not entail moral approval;



and that is how I shall use it.

So much for independence of mind in the moral (or amoral) dimension of our lives. What can we say about it in the other aspects of our experience? It will help us here if we characterize a thoroughly dependent-minded individual and try to anticipate the sort of effects his extreme preoccupation with social conformity is likely to have upon his life, leaving aside the question of its moral effect.

Suppose that someone says this to himself: "Nothing I do should make me feel uncomfortably different or isolated from those social groups or individuals whom I desire to feel at one with; and my conduct should always be calculated to win the approval of these others." (These others, by the way, are not even necessarily around any more. What dominates me might be the image of a dead parent.) Without knowing anything further, one can surmise a good deal about the tone of voice in which a statement of this sort is likely to be made. It is evidently not the voice of someone looking forward with confidence and enthusiasm to the rich and varied possibilities of his future. It is much more likely to be a voice of fear. Given the constant risks of feeling disapproved of or isolated from those whom we value, a life in which these possibilities are seen as a grave personal danger is likely to be infused with an abiding fear, and we know constant fear to be one way in which the felt significance of our lives can be undermined. His interest in social conformity will be oppressively restrictive when it comes to communicating with others because he must always be concerned that the appearance he presents will be entirely commendable from a viewpoint that is not really his own. The spontaneity of genuine intimacy will





be impossible for him. The others whose regard he cares so much about cannot even be contemplated calmly as complex beings to be understood and enjoyed in their own right since the main aspect under which they appear is as threatening forces who can give or withhold the only things that really matter in life. And the appearance he has to fabricate may well be utterly different from the self he would create if only the social and approval desires did not dominate him so. Now in one sense his behaviour is still a matter of self-expression: what interests him, more than anything else, is the approval and sense of belonging which the appearance he presents to the world is designed to give him; and so this appearance expresses his deepest interest. But this self-expression, for what it is worth, will involve obliterating or disguising every idiosyncratic preference or desire within oneself that might disrupt the cherished harmony with others. The self he presents to the world is thus liable to become a rather deformed realization of his natural potential. Furthermore, in so far as social integration is sought to secure a sense of personal belonging, and not merely as a means to personal advancement, his efforts will be self-defeating because his relationships to others will be fraught with fear and self-consciousness. In trying to avoid the more obvious forms of estrangement he finds himself, paradoxically, sharply cut off from anything other than superficial human contact. It is fair to say, surely, that whatever sense of personal fulfilment such a life has to offer will be very thin indeed. That is a psychological claim, but we don't need psychologists to rush out and conduct experiments for verification. Unless we have become infected with a sort of empirical puritanism our ordinary knowledge of what it is to be



human will confirm it.

Now what I have described here is an extreme example of dependent-mindedness -- one could reasonably claim that it is even a caricature. In this form it could be regarded as a lapse from the level of rationality described in the previous section: the individual's rather unbalanced system of interests offers such a dismal prospect of a personally significant life that it can be seen as essentially unrealistic. In the less extreme and far more common instances of dependent-mindedness that view would be far more difficult to defend. The conformist who is not obsessive will doubtless often feel his life to be very meaningful. However, he avoids the evils of the extreme version to the extent that the social and approval desires have been curbed to allow a more natural and uninhibited self-expression -- i.e., in so far as genuine independence of mind is approximated. He can lose himself somewhat in this or that interest without constantly bothering about how those whose esteem he values would regard him; but in deciding what should be pursued as an interest his need for approval and oneness with others may sometimes, perhaps often, restrain him from what he would otherwise pursue with deep satisfaction. Similarly, though his personal relations are not so rigidly circumscribed as the extreme case, they may be tainted with some of the same fear and self-consciousness I mentioned earlier.

Let us set against these images a very different one. It is not difficult to envisage a life in which the social and approval desires still have an important place but have ceased to be oppressive at all. As we all know, there are human relationships in which



reciprocal positive regard flourishes alongside a mutual tolerance, even a mutual enjoyment, of how different each self is in the interests and tastes that give shape to their lives. The approval and sense of belonging that is afforded to each is not contingent upon either forcing his nature into an alien mould. In this context it becomes much easier to express and develop oneself without stringent inhibitions. Of course, in so far as such associations are of interest to one effort and attention has to be given to them, at some expense to other pursuits. But it would be ridiculous to say that an interest was oppressive merely because it commands time and energy that would otherwise be available for different purposes. If that counts as oppression then all our interests oppress us.

This sort of personal relationship provides a paradigm for the sort of social relations that are congruent with personal autonomy in the non-moral aspect of our lives. If an individual's social relations are of this sort he is free to exercise a form of self-government which seems antecedently likely to greatly enhance the felt significance of his life. The criteria of extrinsic acceptability that apply in the formation and pursuit of his interests are not nearly so restrictive as they are for the dependent-minded since in the relations that bind his life to others there is a common recognition of the diverse and unpredictable ways in which human beings can shape meaningful lives for themselves. A drastic social detachment is not the price one has to pay for going his own way.

The connection between autonomy and individuality can be seen pretty clearly at this point. Human individuality, as many writers have understood it, applies to those characteristics of persons which





are unique or relatively uncommon and are either desirable or sufficiently unobjectionable to warrant our tolerance of them. Individuality is thus to be distinguished from intolerable eccentricity: it is what marks out people as different in desirable or at least acceptable ways. The conventional idea of individuality which obtains in any society will be more or less generous in the degree of latitude it permits its members in their self-development. Mill's brilliant critique of Victorian England in On Liberty hinges upon the idea that the conventionally defined margin of acceptable human diversity had narrowed to vanishing point, so that all too often human life became cramped and dwarfed under the relentless pressures of conformity.<sup>12</sup> Allowing for the limits which moral concern places upon how we may develop ourselves, the more generous the idea of individuality which is socially accepted the easier it is for us to avoid this human damage in our attempts to achieve a personally significant life. The fact is that we are different in our temperaments, abilities, and in what naturally attracts us. These elements, one might say, provide the foundation of the self one creates; and tolerant social relations enable one to create a self that harmonizes with this basic structure. Therefore, in a society where the sort of relations I have described obtain, the self-government that individuals can exercise is likely to result in a richer development of individuality than would otherwise be possible. This is not to suggest that human beings realize themselves only through eccentricity. There are shared, common aspects to our lives as well which add greatly to their meaning. (But note that idiosyncracies of belief and style are apt to develop even in this context.) However, doing what everybody else does will still,



as a rule, be preferable in what I have described as tolerant social relations. In that context common pursuits will express what the individual believes suits his own nature: they will not be pretences designed to ensure social belonging and approval.

I have suggested that a trait which I call independence of mind is internal to personal autonomy. To evince this trait in the non-moral aspect of one's life does not presuppose a total social detachment; but it does require that whatever interest one attaches to the satisfaction of the social and approval desires is merely one among others, and does not become a severely limiting condition upon other possible forms of self-development. (The word "severely" here is vague, but that is as it should be. There is an obvious continuum between dependent and independent mindedness.) Now social conditions are not always favourable for the expression of an independent mind and where that is so the cost of self-expression may well be social condemnation and isolation. Whether or not this will be a cost worth paying one cannot say in general. But given the more extensive opportunities for self-development which autonomy gives us in favourable social conditions we have good reason to desire those conditions so that autonomy can be cultivated without prohibitive personal costs. The nature of these social conditions will be dealt with in greater detail in the final section of this chapter.

The concept of independent mindedness helps to clarify the relation of autonomy to social influences. Autonomy does not presuppose, as Skinner assumes, some sort of inexplicable transcendence of external influences.<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, we have no reason to believe that social factors are less important in forming autonomous



character than they are in producing other traits of personality.

In what David Riesman has called "tradition-directed" cultures, where social situations are highly predictable and appropriate behaviour is minutely prescribed and unquestioned, socialization will doubtless make the development of mental independence well nigh impossible.<sup>14</sup>

And authentic commitment to a particular form of life will be extremely difficult where no similar form has been taken seriously in one's culture. Socrates did not mysteriously pop up in ancient Athens. His ethic of the examined life was only possible in a cultural milieu in which moral speculation and debate were already ongoing and sometimes valued activities.

However, the importance of social influences in shaping character may easily be taken to suggest that autonomy is really an incoherent concept. For if we can trace its genesis back to the influence that others have had upon us we find that the social and approval desires are really at the root of it after all. Hence autonomy is ultimately no different from heteronomy. Its distinctiveness is merely a chimera. But what a character trait is must not be confused with how it originated. Psychologically, it would appear that our moral consciousness stems from the desire to win rewards and avert punishments;<sup>15</sup> but moral consciousness, fortunately, is a great deal more than these desires. A cynic might argue that even a so-called developed conscience is just a matter of "internalised" parental and other figures, dispensing self-esteem and guilt. This just does not fit the facts. We are often capable of reflecting upon our lives and soberly criticising what the influential figures in our experience gave us. In our criticism we will employ concepts and assumptions







that also reflect social influences, but that need not imperil one's autonomy. The distinction between autonomy and heteronomy is one that we make to differentiate a certain class of social beings from others. It does not and could not serve to identify anyone who has miraculously transcended the effects of culture.

### Autonomy and Criticism

The two aspects of autonomy which I have identified are clearly distinct. Where social conditions are highly restrictive of individuality it appears that many realistic persons are likely to be pretty dependent-minded and to that extent heteronomous. Conversely, a degree of mental independence might coincide with a certain lack of realism: one's basic system of interests, for instance, might be rather badly adjusted to the reality of one's temperament, abilities, or external circumstances. The two aspects of mind are alike, however, in constituting forms of self-government which are likely to facilitate, other things being equal, the achievement of a significant life. They are also alike in requiring some capacity for criticism and some inclination to utilize it. An autonomous person will not passively accept the claims of others or passively submit to the promptings of desire. As a realist he sees the self as something to be partly created on the basis of a sound understanding of his own nature and external circumstances; and he is aware that the relation of his occurrent desires to his basic system of interests has to be apprehended if temptations are to be avoided. Therefore, ideas pertaining to these matters which are affirmed by others or generated by the self



have to be critically evaluated to determine their truth value.

As an independent-minded being, the critical capacity will be indispensable in permitting an evaluation of options which is not dominated by the approval and social desires.

This critical component of autonomy has been strongly emphasized by recent philosophers of education who have dealt with the topic. It is common to conceive the rationality of the autonomous individual as ideally comprising an extensive understanding of the arts and forms of theoretical knowledge, along with a disposition to reflect upon one's beliefs and conduct in the light of such knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Obviously, a highly developed intellectual capacity, coupled with a rich store of information, can permit a more effective exercise of that critical disposition which is internal to autonomy; but equally obviously, they may not. These are things which may easily and unconsciously be employed for sophisticated rationalization. Erudition enables one to be a bit more ingenious in his self-deception. Inauthentic commitments are often easier to defend to oneself and others when plausible arguments can be readily fabricated in their support. I strongly suspect that ordinary people, with a lot of sense and not much learning, are at least as likely to be genuinely autonomous as polymathic professors. Of course, no philosopher I am aware of would want to say that unrealistic and dependent-minded polymaths are nonetheless autonomous. But there has been a common failure to appreciate the full importance of the fact that the development of intellect per se is not necessarily in accord with autonomous development. These are matters which have obvious educational implications that will be explored in the next chapter.



The critical dimension of autonomy has also provoked some doubts about its value as a personal ideal. After all, thinking for oneself is something that can be done rather badly. Surely it is more important that people think and act correctly than that they think and act independently. Furthermore, the idea of autonomy is commonly opposed to those of obedience or conformity so that its realization would appear to prevent any deference to the opinions of others or to political authority in any form. Robert Paul Wolff, for example, has argued that only anarchism or a virtually unattainable form of democracy could provide an adequate social framework for the cultivation of autonomy. Wolff believes that this shows the desirability of anarchism.<sup>17</sup> I suggest that if his argument were valid it would rather show the undesirability of personal autonomy.

I think we can see that these misgivings pertain to rather different conceptions of autonomy than the one outlined here. In the first place, the critical aspect of autonomy cannot be sharply contrasted with correct thought and action since the close connection between autonomy and reason which I have postulated makes such a contrast quite out of place. Persons who think and act reasonably in developing their systems of interests and in shaping their occurrent wants may occasionally do what is incorrect; but thinking reasonably or realistically means employing the best available means in one's situation to determine what is true or correct. We have no magical capacity to short-circuit the difficult and fallible processes of reason in order to arrive at the truth. Realism is just the practical application of these processes to our own lives. If we want to think and act well we must think realistically. Therefore we





must possess this aspect of autonomy at least.

The relation between correct thought and action and independence of mind is rather more complicated. I have argued that certain forms of amoralist can count as independent-minded, but we do not want the criticism such individuals exercise qua amoralist to bear the honorific stamp of "correct thinking". Assuming that these persons can also be realistic, it is obvious that here autonomy does stand in sharp opposition to thought and action we would approve of upon reflection. However, I have also shown that genuine moral virtue entails independence of mind to the extent that fidelity to the moral interest is required even when the pressures of social conformity oppose it; and for moral persons realism will also be essential if temptations are to be seen for what they are and the morally relevant consequences of anticipated actions are to be foreseen. Therefore both aspects of autonomy can be affirmed as necessary conditions of adequacy in the moral life. In the non-moral area of our lives it can be shown that independence of mind is also likely to be closely connected to correct thought and action as we commonly conceive these. This is most obvious where social conditions are favourable for autonomous persons because in those circumstances mental independence can be cultivated with all its attendant benefits but without the cost of social estrangement and condemnation. Where conditions are unfavourable what counts as appropriate thought and action will be much more obscure. There might seem to be some conflict here between the need to develop a realistic system of interests, which is adequately adjusted to external circumstances, and the need to express oneself in individualistic ways. But even here it is clear that the realistic



thing to do is not necessarily to curb one's individuality since the psychological costs of doing so may be greater than those involved in risking a degree of isolation and disapproval. Thus although a distinction between correct and autonomous thought and action can be maintained the two ideas converge in a number of important ways, and where the autonomy of an individual is combined with moral rectitude and favourable social conditions thinking and acting autonomously will scarcely be distinguishable from doing so correctly.

We still have to examine the problem of what attitude autonomous persons will take towards the views of others and political authority. Clearly, realism will often prescribe that we provisionally accept the claims of other human beings unless we are in a position to conduct a convenient and reliable verification ourselves. It would be a ludicrous interpretation of the idea that we should think for ourselves which prohibited any dependence on the testimony of others in our lives. This idea is rightly associated with autonomy since being critical means thinking for oneself, but properly construed it is perfectly compatible with a sensible respect for the views of others. For example, suppose that the results of a single scientific experiment appeared to be at variance with a theory universally accepted within the scientific community, and a particular individual faced with this evidence still maintained allegiance to the theory on the grounds that it was accepted by all respected scientists. Clearly, it would be wholly inappropriate to accuse him of failing to think for himself. Given the flimsiness of the evidence adduced against the theory and the fact that its general acceptance reflects the informed judgement of all competent persons it would simply be



unreasonable to reject it outright; and hence it would be wrong to accuse someone of being uncritical who maintained faith in the experts under these circumstances. The charge could be made good, however, if the falsifying evidence were shown to be extremely weighty, according to the canons of scientific evidence, and if the grounds for the unanimity of the scholarly community were shown to be inherently suspect. In that case a dogged insistence that the experts must be right certainly would indicate a failure to think for oneself since the individual is in a position to appreciate the weakness of the scientific orthodoxy but an unreasonable reverence for scholarly opinion prevents him from appreciating it. What one would suspect here, of course, is that satisfying some form of the social and approval desires has become a more important determinant of what the individual comes to believe than a genuine concern for the truth; but whatever its cause, his belief in the orthodox theory indicates a lack of the critical disposition not because it is based on a faith in the testimony of others per se but because the particular circumstances of the case make such faith unreasonable in this instance. Thinking for oneself, in its most important sense, is always liable to lead us to think differently from others because it is indistinguishable from thinking in the light of reason and other people, unfortunately, are always liable to think in ways that are dominated by other considerations. As a realist, the autonomous individual is aware of the limitations of testimony, including the claims of experts, as a guide to the truth; and he will take these limitations into account in forming his beliefs. As an independent-minded being he will be unafraid to proclaim how he differs in his beliefs from others. There is nothing





in the ideal of autonomy endorsed here to suggest that its realization would involve intellectual anarchy. Neither is there anything to suggest that it is in accord with political anarchism. To the extent that political authority is rationally justified it will be accepted by autonomous beings since by definition they are susceptible to rational argument. They will not accept any absolute political obligations but that is undesirable anyhow.

### Autonomy and Freedom

I have been trying to clarify the idea of autonomy and to indicate something of its desirability by showing the relation it bears to what might be called the liberal conception of a significant life. At least in circumstances where realism and independence of mind can flourish autonomy seems very likely to ensure a life that is more personally significant than others. This claim is based upon certain assumptions about human beings which are, I believe, relatively uncontroversial. It is assumed that the interests which give value to a person's experience are likely to be pursued with greater absorption and satisfaction where the social and approval desires are not a constant preoccupation; and the greater the tolerance of human diversity, once we allow for the limitations imposed upon us by the moral interest, the easier it is for individuals to achieve a meaningful life. Furthermore, genuine virtue, as that is normally understood, presupposes both aspects of autonomy. Thus it would seem that we have a quite formidable defense of autonomy as a personal ideal, and this provides us with a basis upon which those social conditions that are



congruent with autonomy can be justified. The question which arises now, is whether these conditions are those of what we would, upon reflection, call a free society. To answer this the connection between autonomy and freedom must be more carefully examined.

Irrespective of the particular content of an individual's interests there are certain goods which he will almost certainly desire access to if he is to achieve a meaningful life. Among these are liberties which people are very commonly deprived of as a result of economic conditions: access to adequate food, adequate shelter, medical care and the resources of leisure and money which the pursuit of virtually any interest presupposes. Of course, there will always be individuals who subscribe to some rather austere notion of a worthwhile life in which these goods are enjoyed to a degree that would be less than adequate for most of us. For that reason, it is appropriate to say that people should simply be at liberty to enjoy them. What we are talking about are certain highly desirable freedoms, not compulsory medical care, housing, and so forth. These liberties are so fundamental to the conceptions of the good that most of us hold that without them life is apt to become intolerable. More commonly perhaps, the conditions of a tolerable existence can be secured but only through an effort which expends all or almost all of the individual's energies. His consciousness is dominated by the problem of how to survive without great suffering, so not much consideration can be given to the problem of what a truly worthwhile existence would be. In these circumstances it is pretty clear that autonomy is unlikely to prosper. The narrow concerns which command his attention leave little room in which authentic commitments of any



sort could develop. In order to secure the minimal level of well-being where this commonly depends upon the positive regard of others there will be enormous pressure on the individual to blindly act and judge according to what makes for social approval. Not much in the way of genuine moral virtue can be expected from such a being. We do sometimes find people who are capable of moral excellence under conditions of extreme deprivation, but we recognize this as something especially admirable because it is so difficult. The realization of individuality, which is possible through independence of mind in the non-moral life, is impossible where a man's constant preoccupation are the primitive needs that would dominate virtually any human being in the same situation. These are simple, obvious facts about ourselves. They are useful nevertheless in enabling us to identify certain economic liberties that autonomy presupposes. Where they are absent independence of mind, if it had previously developed, would seem very likely to be eroded, and if it had not then its development would appear almost impossible.

Liberty of speech, as this has traditionally been conceived, will also be required for the adequate exercise of autonomy. Where this freedom exists it is an acknowledgement of the individual's capacity to determine what is true or appropriate upon the basis of independent criticism, but even when such criticism leads to beliefs that are patently false or unreasonable this liberty cannot be revoked. If it were then the state would be constituting itself as the ultimate arbiter of truth to whose authority, in an intellectual as well as a political sense, all citizens must defer. This would be an intolerable state of affairs for autonomous beings. It is crucial to the idea of





autonomy that the individual can function as a distinct centre of evaluation and criticism. As a realist, the autonomous person will heed the counsel of others; but that is something to be accepted only upon the basis of some rational appraisal of the counsel. His independence of mind means that he will want to express himself, perhaps in eccentric ways, without suffering social penalties; and if he respects the same characteristic in others he will want them to have the same freedom. An indiscriminate tolerance of self-expression would lead to anarchism; and one can reasonably expect that that would lead to a massive loss of freedom for the weaker members of society, and hence a loss of opportunities for them to express themselves. But so far as the promulgation of beliefs go something very near a complete tolerance can be countenanced without gravely and constantly endangering the well-being of others. In according this liberty to human beings we must concede the possibility that its use will commonly lead to some harm through the adoption of false or unreasonable beliefs. Where there is a clear and present danger of very serious harm a sound case can be made for temporarily suspending the freedom. Even Mill believed that this was legitimate.<sup>18</sup> Through such interference the most damaging consequences of an absolute freedom of speech can be averted. In so far as those who exercise that liberty are genuinely autonomous their capacity for rational criticism will be a powerful corrective to its abuse. Nevertheless, it would be silly to suppose that freedom of speech, qualified by nothing more than a concern to avoid very grave and obvious dangers, will inevitably lead to the triumph of reason. Mill was perhaps less than realistic on this point. But given the desirability of autonomy



and the importance of this freedom as an area within which it can be exercised the need to avoid any further abridgement is obvious. Furthermore, as the state -- or any other element in one's society for that matter -- encroaches upon freedom of speech the development of autonomy within those who do not already possess it will become increasingly difficult. For to the extent that this encroachment has occurred an individual is likely to find it difficult to develop any secure belief in the self as an independent centre of evaluation and criticism. The social context in which he lives is one in which others -- those who wield political power, or an indeterminate and intolerant public, perhaps -- have taken upon themselves the task of regulating the expressed beliefs of individuals; and for that reason the workings of the individual mind, free of the inhibitions of convention and orthodoxy, are socially discredited as a means of determining what is true or correct. The more restrictive the encroachment has become the more likely it is that the individual mind will be passively responsive to external pressures, and where this has occurred realism and independence of mind are necessarily impossible.

Essential to the liberal idea of a free society is the possession to certain liberties pertaining to the direction of the political process by all persons of mature faculties. We want to say that the free society is necessarily a democratic one. "What is implied (by the concept of democracy) is some established procedure by means of which those who suffer from state action can be consulted and can bring their desires and opinions to bear on it."<sup>19</sup> One should add that the procedure must be such that majority opinion determines who



occupies the more important political offices or what general policies are pursued or both; and decisions made in these areas must be subject to revision by the electorate at fairly regular intervals. Thus in a democracy citizens play a decisive role in the direction of the political process through the use of the political liberties. The possession of these liberties as a legal right, provided they are not undermined by a widespread intolerance of political unorthodoxy, gives the individual an area wherein autonomy can be employed.

There is, however, a case for arguing that political freedom, as it is understood here, is rather less important from the viewpoint of autonomy than the liberties I have already discussed. In large modern democracies the individual is liable to feel that his right to vote, to stand for political office, and so forth, carry negligible weight in shaping the political life of his community. This feeling will be especially acute for those who hold eccentric political views since the possibility of winning over the masses who oppose them will seem a virtually impossible task. Life within a democracy may appear to offer no more opportunity for the effective exercise of autonomy than a benevolent dictatorship would; and the individual's sense of political impotence in a mass democracy cannot be dismissed as groundless because it may reflect a perfectly accurate awareness of the relative powerlessness of a single voice among so many. Clearly, autonomy can flourish in situations where the political liberties do not exist or are regarded as more or less wholly ineffective to realize one's political goals. A serious abridgement of freedom of speech or of the economic liberties would be far more damaging to personal autonomy. A strong defense of democracy will ultimately





depend, I think, upon considerations other than the desirability of personal autonomy, and these are not my main concern here. It can be argued plausibly, for example, that despotism has a tendency to become malign or out of touch with the needs of those who are subject to it. Where power resides in some exclusive class, as Mill pointed out,<sup>20</sup> the interests of others need not be brutally disregarded but it becomes so easy to simply misunderstand them. This sort of argument will probably provide the core of any justification of democracy. However, the idea of autonomy is nonetheless pertinent to this justification. In failing to meet the needs of their subjects, those who monopolize political power are perhaps especially prone to interfere with the facilitating conditions of autonomy. They are likely to see freedom of speech as a threat to their position of exclusive power, especially if it is vigorously utilized by autonomous beings; and since their attitude to their subjects will be paternalistic at best, they will have no scruples about restricting liberties in this area. (One suspects that this is also likely to occur in the larger area of private freedom, which will be discussed below.) Because of these likely consequences of undemocratic government those of us who value autonomy have good reason to prize democratic institutions, even where the political liberties they confer upon us appear to carry little force for each person taken individually. Admittedly, autonomous beings must be vigilant against the tyrannical majoritarianism which is possible within a democracy. A benevolent despotism, so long as it remained benevolent, is arguably preferable to that. But in a pluralistic society at least it is antecedently likely that the freedom required by personal autonomy will be more secure under



democratic than under undemocratic rule. Furthermore, political activity has commonly been one enormously important area of self-expression for human beings. For that reason it would seem that if the political liberties are commonly perceived as personally useless they should be enhanced. Norman Daniels has argued that economic inequalities are liable to undermine any attempt to establish an equality of political liberty which is independent of economic factors.<sup>21</sup> Given the relevance of economic conditions to judgements about freedom this is quite plausible. Perhaps greater economic equality would help to restore the lost sense of political potency. The devolution of political power to smaller communities within the state and the democratization of the work-place might also be helpful in this respect. How the political liberties may be most effectively enlarged is a matter upon which I can only speculate at present; but the fact that their enlargement would provide an important domain for the exercise and development of autonomy is hardly in doubt.

Finally, I want to consider an area of freedom which is notoriously difficult to demarcate but is quite indispensable to personal autonomy. It is not difficult to envisage a society in which the liberties I have already mentioned exist in some measure but social conditions remain highly oppressive. Freedom of speech about religious and sexual matters might coincide with a vigorous suppression of all except a narrow range of approved religious and sexual practices. The political liberties might be employed to impose a deadening uniformity of lifestyle upon non-conforming minorities. Liberals such as Mill and Berlin have commonly been concerned with defending a certain area of freedom within which the individual is permitted to



shape a large portion of his life according to personal and perhaps eccentric preferences. This is the area of what one might call private freedom. Mill's so-called harm principle is partly an attempt to mark out this territory. He maintained that interference with the liberty of human beings was justified only where it was necessary to prevent harm to others.<sup>22</sup> The problem of paternalism, which Mill did not deal with adequately, will be confronted again later. For the present I want to say something about the harm principle, which Mill quite rightly took to be the most important ground for interference with freedom.

The difficulty of using this principle stems from the fact that the concept of harm, like so many in practical discourse, will alter its meaning according to the moral viewpoint of the concept-user. To harm somebody is to seriously impair his efforts to lead a meaningful life or some approximation thereof to which he aspires. Thus if I stop a psychopathic sadist from expressing his taste for physical cruelty I might cause him intense personal frustration, but I would deny that I harmed him thereby since a life of sadistic self-indulgence does not even remotely resemble one I could call worthwhile. In much the same way, religious zealots who cause considerable suffering to others in their efforts to win converts and prevent apostasy could sincerely deny that they cause harm so long as they believe that a life outside the faith is virtually worthless. The concept of harm is logically tied to that of a significant or worthwhile life so that when this sort of life is conceived differently the concept of harm will be used in different ways. The implications of this for the harm principle are pretty obvious. Suppose that I am a religious





fanatic who is deeply distressed by the evil influence which atheists exert in my community. Although these atheists do not broadcast their views -- ex hypothesi it is not freedom of speech that is at issue -- they are often admired members of the community and so their mere failure to participate in official rituals, and so on, is often enough to lure the young and impressionable into their midst. As a result of my religious commitment I will doubtless regard this atheism as a source of the gravest harm to others; and therefore I need not adduce some illiberal notion of paternalism to argue for my view that universal adherence to proper religious practices must be rigorously enforced. All I need is the harm principle. Thus it is clear that a Millian defense of a large area of private freedom requires more than the abstract formula of the harm principle, along with a repudiation of all but the most innocuous forms of paternalism. What is necessary is that the concept of harm be applied in relation to a certain, distinctively liberal conception of a worthwhile existence which entails that forms of life may continue to have to have considerable value while differing enormously in religious or irreligious commitments, in sexual preferences, in how leisure is employed, in the work that is done, and so on, even while they co-exist within the same community. Corresponding to the diversity of acceptable ways of shaping their lives human beings must be accorded an area of personal freedom which is not to be violated unless rather extraordinary circumstances prevail. The mere fact that a particular religious practice, say, is offensive to me and wins converts wherever it is tolerated does not give me adequate reason for not tolerating it. Harm to others does not occur, when



through the influence of example or most types of advocacy a form of life I regard as alien or even personally repellent is adopted by human beings of mature faculties. A great deal more needs to be said about the interpretation of the harm principle; but my interest here is in trying to exhibit the relation between a generous conception of private freedom, of which I assume my readers have a sound if somewhat rough grasp, and personal autonomy.

In discussing the nature of the independent mind I argued that given favourable social conditions it is likely to facilitate the realization of a more personally significant life than would otherwise be possible. This is so because it will enable the individual to form and pursue his interests without the social and approval desires functioning as highly restrictive conditions of extrinsic acceptability. Eccentric predilections may be cultivated and even the more common pursuits can be engaged in with greater engrossment. If autonomous self-expression is to be possible without untoward consequences it must occur in a social context wherein individuals enjoy a large area of private freedom which can be exploited without undergoing the privations of social alienation. It is normally important even for independent-minded beings to find like-minded persons who will commend and not merely tolerate the life they have chosen to lead. The adequate pursuit of so many interests depends upon co-operative activities in which like-minded persons engage; and though self-respect and social esteem are distinct for autonomous beings the latter is doubtless an important reinforcement to the former. A large area of private freedom will obviously be necessary for the emergence of the various human associations with which the autonomous



individual may choose to identify. Thus the satisfactory exercise of autonomy can be shown to require a generously conceived area of private liberty.

It might be objected, however, that the range of private freedom we regard as intuitively desirable is not the same as that which is congruent with the ideal of personal autonomy. For example, an uncontroversial liberal view would be that individuals of sound mind should be free to join religious sects whose practices are at variance with personal autonomy. If autonomy is so central to the liberal viewpoint why should individuals be permitted to act in ways that are repugnant to it? Now if a man chooses to place himself in a situation where the exercise of personal autonomy is virtually impossible then his choice strongly suggests that he is not fully autonomous. Autonomy implies that in the ordinary course of events one does not want to find himself in circumstances where this characteristic can no longer be expressed. Given the desirability of autonomy we will want to encourage this characteristic among those who do not already possess this trait; but severely restricting the freedom of individuals on paternalistic grounds would appear unlikely to help in most cases. The special problems involved in cultivating autonomy among children will be addressed in the following chapter. But it would seem that heteronomous adults, with settled dispositions and inclinations, are unlikely to be transformed into autonomous beings by compelling them to behave as if they already were. Moreover, there is good reason to regard such interference with liberty as evil and not merely futile. We must recognize that even where the optimum conditions exist for the flourishing of autonomy some individuals are likely to fall short





of that ideal, and hence the problem arises of what social conditions will enhance their opportunities to approximate a meaningful life. Law as well as less formal social norms will encourage morally acceptable behaviour even where the moral interest is deficient or non-existent, and among heteronomous lives it is still possible to distinguish between what is more or less personally significant.

If a man of sound mind desires to join a religious sect which encourages heteronomy it will very probably be because he believes his life would feel more significant as a result of his participation in the sect.

If membership turns out to be a disappointment he will be free to leave -- and the liberal will want him to have this freedom at all times. Now a man of sound mind can be expected to be a better judge of what makes his life feel worthwhile than others are. After all, it is his feelings we are talking about, and only he has access to them. If this is true then the individual's choices in the important areas of his life, such as religious commitment, should not as a rule be interfered with even if he is heteronomous, unless the moral constraints that apply to human relations warrant such interference. (The relationship between personal choice and the significance of a human life will be discussed more fully in the final chapter.) Thus there are good grounds for according heteronomous human beings an area of privacy at least very like that which the exercise of personal autonomy calls for. This point does not, however, make the ideal of autonomy redundant in the liberal defense of private liberty. Unless the ideal is preferable, in some strong sense, to competing ideals it is not obvious why we should prefer a world in which individuals enjoy a large area of personal freedom, to be exploited according to individual



preferences, to one where a pervasive dependence of mind has effectively undermined this area. This is not an idle theoretical preference which has no bearing on how we conduct our lives because we are always faced with the question of what sort of society we will create for the future; and an increasingly heteronomous society, as B.F. Skinner forcefully reminds us, is always a real option.

I assume that a society that ensures the basic freedoms I have discussed, all too briefly, in this section will be one that we would affirm to be free. The freedoms which it accords its members facilitate the growth and exercise of personal autonomy and thereby enhance, in an enormously important way, the significance of human lives. For those who fail to realize this personal ideal the area of personal liberty they enjoy will nonetheless be important if they are to approximate, as best they can, a fully meaningful life. But given the value of autonomy, the creation of an heteronomous society in which the basic liberties have been eroded can reasonably be regarded as degrading, despite whatever goods it might contain. A society in which these freedoms are safeguarded, on the other hand, is to that extent one that accords us the respect that is our due.



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> B.F. Skinner, Beyond Freedom and Dignity (New York: Bantham/Vintage Books, 1972), pp.17-20.

<sup>2</sup> A.R. White, Attention (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), pp. 102-109; P.S. Wilson, Interest and Discipline in Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 37-39; R.F. Dearden, The Philosophy of Primary Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 18-24.

<sup>3</sup> It might be objected that a man's interests do not include, as my argument assumes, his deepest personal commitments and concerns. Paul Ziff has argued that "interest" implies that calm, dispassionate outlook of the observer. (Paul Ziff, Semantic Analysis (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1960), p. 220). What Ziff ignores is that interests can be intense, passionate, even consuming. However, his argument may provoke some misgivings. There does seem to be a certain artificiality in the assumption -- which I make -- that a man's deepest values can be analysed as interests. In some contexts, which I suspect are relatively rare, we deploy the word interest in contrast with the ideas of being indifferent or valuing something purely on instrumental grounds. In this sense interests can be luke-warm, all-consuming or anything in between. For instance, we might say of a saint: "The service of God was the only thing that interested him." Again, the special sort of valuing of another human being that is involved in love might be analysed in terms of this concept: one is interested, in an especially intense way, in the other person and interested in maintaining a special sort of relationship to them. More frequently, "interest" is used in a more limited way because a further contrast is added to the one already mentioned -- i.e., between what one is (just) interested in as opposed to passionately concerned about or committed to. It is the frequency of this usage which gives Ziff's position its plausibility. Thus if one wanted to characterize the attitude of a saint to his religious ideal the word "interest" will normally be out of place unless it is indicated that the interest virtually precludes all others. I use the word in its broader and rarer sense and this gives rise to some odd-sounding claims, but no philosophical harm is done.

<sup>4</sup> The relevance of such a belief is often disguised by the imprecise way that we describe interests. Consider the case of a sociologist who is interested in crime. Surely we do not want to say that this interest means the sociologist believes that crime is a commendable activity. Therefore it might appear that interests do not entail the sort of evaluative beliefs which I have claimed they do. But the sociologist does not share the same interest as the criminal: he is not interested in perpetrating crime but rather in studying it. And surely if he believed that studying crime was a useless or reprehensible pursuit it would make no sense to say that he was interested in doing so.

<sup>5</sup> Where it is a particular course of action the relevant belief could be made explicit as follows: "It is possibly (or definitely) worthwhile







for me to do X on some occasion" where X is the object of interest. Unlike dispositional interests of other sorts, the judgement of value that is implied here is not necessarily partly or wholly grounded upon intrinsic features of X.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, Groundwork to the Metaphysic of Morals, trans. H.J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 65-67, 100-102, 108-112.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory Vlastos, "Justice and Equality," in Social Justice, ed. Richard Brandt (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1962), pp. 44-47.

<sup>8</sup> There are other factors which bring out the importance of this moral interest in ascribing the virtues. There might be a culpable failure to anticipate the evil consequences of one's intentional deceit, for instance, and this would certainly be relevant to the question of whether one was honest or not. Egotistical people are commonly so preoccupied with what best serves themselves that they simply fail to foresee the damage their wrongdoing might cause. This clearly shows a lack of moral interest; and justifies the inference that the individual is not honest. Interest, as I suggested earlier, is logically tied to attention and effort. Moral beings are expected to show alertness to the moral consequences of their acts as well as effort in the resistance of temptation. To plead that one did not even recognize the temptation as such is no excuse where a consciousness of bad moral consequences could reasonably be expected. Furthermore, even when these effects, whether anticipated or not, are morally insignificant the apparent motive may still suggest a non-existent or gravely weak moral interest. Morally commendable but imperfect beings will sometimes act out of spite when under some fairly unusual psychological pressure. But suppose that Jones, in a situation where no special pressures are upon him, perpetrates an act of deceit out of pure spite. No significant damage is done or anticipated: someone is humiliated, perhaps, but soon recovers his psychological equilibrium. Now such an act would give us cause to suspect Jones's moral integrity somewhat; and a proneness for such lapses would justify the most serious doubts. If someone is inclined to act spitefully without being subject to special pressures then that suggests the satisfaction he takes in humiliating others, etc., is something he approves of, at least in himself. In other words, he is interested in doing such things. Such an interest is simply incompatible with a robust moral interest. One cannot, simultaneously, be a committed sadist and a moral person. If we have reason to attribute the former commitment to someone we have reason to think he is not a moral person and ergo not an honest one.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jean Piaget, The Moral Judgement of the Child, trans. Marjorie Gabain (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1932), pp. 195-325; and Lawrence Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Development," in Moral Education, ed. C.M. Beck, B.S. Crittenden and E.V. Sullivan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 86-112.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 239.



- 11 R.F. Dearden, "Autonomy and Education," in Education and Reason, ed. R.F. Dearden, P.H. Hirst and R.S. Peters (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 66.
- 12 J.S. Mill, On Liberty, pp. 67-90.
- 13 B.F. Skinner, Beyond Freedom and Dignity, pp. 17-20.
- 14 David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 11-12.
- 15 See Jean Piaget, The Moral Judgement of the Child, pp. 326-414.
- 16 R.F. Dearden, "Autonomy and Education," Education and Reason, ed. P.H. Hirst, R.F. Dearden, and R.S. Peters (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 72-73; and J.P. White, Towards a Compulsory Curriculum (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).
- 17 Robert Paul Wolff, In Defense of Anarchism (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).
- 18 J.S. Mill, On Liberty, pp. 67-68.
- 19 R.S. Peters, Ethics and Education, p. 295.
- 20 J.S. Mill, Utilitarianism, On Liberty, and Considerations on Representative Government (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1972), pp. 208-209.
- 21 Norman Daniels, "Equal Liberty and Unequal Worth of Liberty" in Norman Daniels (ed.), Reading Rawls (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1975), pp. 256-263.
- 22 J.S. Mill, On Liberty, pp. 12-17.



## EDUCATION

In this chapter I want to explore the main educational implications of the liberal moral position. Within the context of contemporary philosophy of education my general approach will require some justification. It is now very common for practitioners of that discipline to see their work as requiring the second-order clarification of substantive problems of educational policy rather than any attempt to grapple directly with such problems. Perhaps this view is more prominent in declarations of meta-philosophical belief than in the actual practice of educational philosophy. Nevertheless, it is a view which will appear to be very blatantly at variance with the way I shall talk about education. Some comment on this matter is therefore called for.

### Philosophical Analysis and the Meanings of "Education"

We sometimes use the word "education" to pick out certain general processes of cultural transmission that are to be found in any society where older members are actively concerned with the sort of persons the young will develop into. One crucial determinant of personal development will be what the young come to learn, and the concern of the older generation will be expressed in large part through the provisions they make to ensure that certain things get learnt rather than others. Children will learn a great deal without any special provisions being made -- a first language will be acquired, habits and rudimentary skills will be just picked up. But even in a







very simple culture it is obvious that unless adults make deliberate efforts to encourage certain achievements and discourage others what is actually learnt is liable to diverge too much from what the prevailing wisdom defines as necessary or desirable learning. For that reason life in the most primitive society is still likely to be characterized by what we would recognize as educational practices, and not merely processes of casual socialization such as first language acquisition. That is to say, we will find adults making special efforts in their dealings with children to foster the learning of skills, information, dispositions, beliefs and so forth, which are thought to be of lasting value to members of that society.

In talking about education, however, we usually have something more specific in mind than certain general processes of cultural transmission that are evident in any society. Our focus is rather upon the institutions in which these processes are instantiated in a particular community and/or upon what is conventionally defined therein as learning of enduring value to future members. When politicians or policy-makers talk of declining educational standards or the need for greater investment in education they are obviously employing an idea (or ideas) of education specific to our own culture. Indeed, very commonly we use "education" as a synonym for "modern schooling". In such utterances the word marks out something of disputable value. The value of education in the trans-cultural sense can hardly be seriously challenged -- or defended for that matter -- since its range of possible application is simply too vast and heterogeneous. To raise the question of value here is rather like asking if change is desirable, without any specification



of the sort of change one is concerned with. On the other hand, when we try to examine education as a particular set of institutions, shared beliefs and practices the question of value becomes not only a sensible but often an important one. Here we have something more substantial to talk about, and we may find that in our own society, for example, educational practices tend to be inefficient, or that too much or too little importance is attached to education, or that what is commonly taken to be necessary or desirable learning is not really so. Within discourse of this sort "education" will normally have a tolerably clear descriptive meaning but carry no built-in evaluative force. If you said something about "contemporary Soviet education" your use of that phrase would doubtless make it pretty clear just what you were talking about, but the final word in the phrase indicates nothing about your attitude towards whatever learning is systematically promoted in Soviet society. Nevertheless, it would probably be misleading to postulate culturally specific concepts of education, as if these were quite separate from the trans-cultural concept designated by the same word because in referring to contemporary Soviet education, say, one actually employs the trans-cultural concept. The words "contemporary" and "Soviet" simply give a specific, socio-historical content to the formal conditions of meaning which constitute that concept. Therefore it seems more appropriate to regard culturally specific ideas of education as conceptions, rather than independent concepts, which are subsumed within the trans-cultural sense of the word. The elaboration of their meaning simply requires a filling out of the very abstract semantic formula supplied by the latter.



There is a further complication, however, which our analysis must take account of. Suppose that someone utters the following sentence: "Contemporary Soviet education is not real education at all." One plausible interpretation of this somewhat paradoxical statement would be that it is intended as an assertion that what counts as education in the Soviet Union is utterly different from what ought to count as such. On this interpretation the second appearance of "education" in the sentence invokes a very different notion than the culturally specific idea invoked in its first use. Just what conditions must learning satisfy if it is to be educational in this more obscure sense? It must be what the speaker regards as having enduring value in that it helps create the sort of people whom he believes children, in some social context implicitly or explicitly referred to, should eventually become. In this sense the word serves for the expression of certain values the speaker subscribes to. And if we leave aside these values, one finds that no particular learning is logically tied to these uses of the word. Given the statement above, it would be completely unclear to us as to what sort of learning the speaker has in mind when he talks of "real education" unless we already knew something about what sort of persons he believed children should be encouraged to become in contemporary Soviet society. The descriptive meaning of the word will thus vary enormously depending on the values of whoever is using it: it is up to him to decide, within the immense area of possible human achievement and activity marked out by the concept of learning, what is or is not educational. If he shares the religious convictions of Jacques Maritain he will believe that "the education of man ... should





be based on the Christian idea of man."<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps he believes that the idea of religious education is an absurdity since only indoctrination is possible in this area. The close logical connection between the speaker's values and some uses of "education" enables us to distinguish an evaluative concept of education from the trans-cultural concept and its derivative conceptions because the latter involve no such connection.

Analytic philosophers of education have been reluctant to openly address the problem of how content might be given to the evaluative concept. They fear that in doing so they would be forgoing the ethical neutrality which is proper to their discipline. Some attention has been given to the trans-cultural idea but this has shed no light on anything of importance.<sup>2</sup> Unlike some other highly abstract concepts it appears that the abuse and misunderstanding of this one is not closely related to significant theoretical or practical problems. Its clarification has proved to be a dull business. A more interesting object of inquiry might appear to be found in whatever conception of education is specific to contemporary English-speaking culture. One might interpret R.S. Peters's writings on the subject of education partly as an attempt to do just that. (Although Peters prefers to talk of our modern concept of education the word "conception" may be more appropriate here, as I have already suggested.)

But the possible value of such an inquiry is also highly problematic. In the first place, it seems likely that the methods of the human sciences will be rather more illuminating in this area than the armchair ruminations of philosophers. If we wanted to understand the Spartan conception of education, for instance, then an



examination of Spartan ordinary language would hardly provide the last word on the matter. This conception would include shared beliefs about what learning possessed lasting worth for the young, about how desirable learning was to be encouraged, and so forth; and these beliefs would be evidenced not only by what Spartans said but also, and more importantly, by what learning they actually fostered and how they fostered it. There is the possibility that Spartan educational practices were actually rather different from how they were conceived in ordinary discourse; and these practices would undoubtedly provide a more revealing insight into their conception of education than the "official" view. In a culture such as our own the sophistication of educational institutions and their complex relations with other aspects of society make the possibility of a marked disparity between actual practices and professed beliefs especially likely. Empirical research into these practices will have to be based upon an understanding of what counts as educational in the trans-cultural sense if the researcher is to really study what he wants to, but I know of no social scientist who needs the help of the professional philosopher to do that.

It is also the case that the very complexity of our culture can make talk of "our conception of education" rather deceptive. For this phrase suggests that despite our frequent disagreements about education there is some common, detailed content which virtually all members of our society consistently give to that word. Now I do not deny that the main outlines of something called "our modern idea of education" might be made explicit by someone familiar with contemporary linguistic usage. One could point to some connection between education



and the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, between education and schooling, and so forth. But it is one thing to sketch in a rough sort of way the broad contours of an idea (or set of related ideas) and it is quite another to formulate a detailed and coherent viewpoint that will facilitate the exploration of theoretical and practical problems. Quite naturally, the analytic philosopher will want to achieve the latter, but he cannot do so as long as he conceives his task as a purely descriptive one because as one begins to probe our modern idea of education its apparent coherence vanishes. For example, according to Peters the development of critical intelligence is intrinsic to being educated, as that characteristic is now generally conceived.<sup>3</sup> It is certainly true that critical intelligence is commonly thought -- at least among academics and intellectuals -- to be an essential educational objective, and one can certainly find some conscientious attempts to foster this sort of mental development in contemporary schooling. Nevertheless, it is a sociological commonplace that schooling also works, very often, to secure students' adjustment to a particular social order in a way that discourages fundamental social criticism. It is not plausible to say that this feature of schooling represents the intrusion of non-educational purposes (i.e., in the neutral, culturally-specific sense of "non-educational") into the system because there are a great many people, who may well out-number the intellectuals and academics, who regard uncritical adjustment to the social order as an achievement of lasting worth for the young. In other words, a neutral, descriptive account of our idea of education will inevitably unearth a disparate and conflicting set of values rather than the coherent, common viewpoint





that the analytic philosopher might have hoped for. To avoid this outcome there will be an enormous temptation for him to be selective in his account. He will be inclined to underscore certain common assumptions about educated persons while quietly ignoring conflicting beliefs. In this way a consistent and detailed analysis of education can be set forth, and in so far as the philosopher's audience is composed of like-minded individuals the picture he constructs can be easily passed off as the impartial elucidation of a conception (or concept) that is shared by virtually all adept language users. After all, he will be describing accurately how they use the word.

A selective process such as this will naturally reflect the ethical preferences of the inquirer. For example, why does Peters characterize the educated man as possessing depth and breadth of theoretical knowledge and intellectual passions?<sup>4</sup> With at least as much warrant from ordinary language he might have described him simply as the extensively schooled individual, whose knowledge might be narrowly technical and whose character might be devoid of intellectual enthusiasm. Presumably, the answer is to be found in Peters' ethical convictions. In fact, the tension between analytic neutrality and the desire to say something ethically committed about education is very palpable in his writings. He has denied that it was ever his intention "to fabricate a concept of education out of my vision of what people ought to become";<sup>5</sup> and elsewhere in discussing the significance of his work on that concept he endorses Wittgenstein's famous dictum that philosophy leaves everything as it is. On the same page, however, he points out that his analysis is an important aid to the position of those who wish to defend "the overall ideal" it embodies.<sup>6</sup>



In short, what is offered as a neutral analysis is simultaneously presented as a morally partisan contribution to educational discourse.

In his efforts to say something significant about education any philosopher is likely to find himself, like Peters, engaged in the task of giving content to the evaluative concept of education. And if his official meta-philosophical position demands ethical neutrality in the process of analysis then he is also liable to find himself, like Peters, presenting a controversial educational ideal in the guise of an impartial analysis of current linguistic usage. To succumb to this fate is not philosophically desirable since the real point of the analysis, as a more or less convincing expression of a particular ethical viewpoint, is thereby obscured. In fairness to Peters, he has provided some ingenious argument to justify education as he conceives it.<sup>7</sup> But it is at least misleading to separate justification and conceptual analysis as he does. If Peters' justification is as strong as he supposes then we should conceive education along the lines that he has suggested. The dreary preoccupation with whether he has accurately described ordinary usage is a matter of peripheral interest.<sup>8</sup>

I have been trying to show that the attempt to say something significant about education leads the analytic philosopher to fill out the evaluative concept in terms of a particular ethical viewpoint -- unless, of course, he chooses to abandon the attempt altogether and turns his attention to other matters. If these are the inevitable options one might feel that his neutrality was still worth preserving, even at the cost of remaining silent, qua philosopher, about education; but silence on this matter is unlikely to be (and ought not to be) a



comfortable condition. The formation of an evaluative conception of education is an inescapable burden for human beings in a sophisticated society. Unlike their primitive forbears they cannot live with the illusion that the traditions of their culture are unalterable features of human experience to which no real alternatives exist. I may unreflectively accept the educational practices and values of my society, but in doing so I do not evade the responsibility of adopting a moral attitude towards them. I just unreflectively commend the conventional wisdom of my own culture.

Attempts to formulate a conception of education, in the evaluative sense, cannot reasonably be deemed an entirely arbitrary matter of personal preference since they may be deemed better or worse according to uncontroversial canons of philosophical argument. The process of formulation, if it is a rational one, will have to include an effort to clarify the suggested content of the concept and to show that this content is logically grounded in, or at least logically compatible with, our general moral outlook. A superficially acceptable educational view may always turn out, under closer inspection, to be at variance with more fundamental convictions. A complacent acceptance of religious indoctrination in childhood may coincide with allegiance to the view that the rationality of other human beings must always be respected. Thus the philosopher's skill in ensuring clarity and consistency in discourse has obvious and important relevance to the formation of educational value judgements. The application of this skill cannot show that one conception of education is necessarily preferable to any conceivable alternative, but it certainly can be shown that some are clearer and more internally





consistent than others; and it is very likely that our basic moral outlook will logically oblige us, so long as we want to live up to the demands it entails, to adopt at least the general framework of a particular conception of education.

Even if this is true it might still be maintained that philosophical competence is insufficient to enable us to rationally create such a conception. For what is also needed here is extensive empirical knowledge about human learning and the society in which it is to be fostered, as well as a developed first-order form of knowledge to supply rationally grounded moral insight. Only when these materials are available can second-order philosophical knowledge be combined with them to create clear, consistent and verifiable educational principles. Unfortunately, these materials are not available now (and may never be) and so the philosopher must sit on the sidelines of educational debate, in much the same way as he sits on the sidelines of the natural sciences, making neutral observations about what goes on but offering no substantive contribution to the progress of the activity itself. He can console himself with the hope that one day he will be entitled to enter the fray when more precise and powerful empirical theories have been developed in the human sciences and something called "moral knowledge" has appeared on the scene. Alternately, he might assign himself a modest participatory role, similar to the function of a referee in a game. Since those who engage in educational discourse frequently reason badly it is useful, or so the argument goes, to have an overseer who will note breaches of the rules of logic. But a referee is not entitled to try to determine the actual outcome of a game; and in a similar way the philosopher-overseer, by



virtue of the knowledge he inevitably lacks, cannot try to determine the outcome of our educational deliberations.

It can hardly be denied that knowledge of a non-philosophical sort is pertinent in this area, but it does not follow that philosophers have to refrain from directly engaging the problem of how we should conceive education until researchers in the human sciences have a greater contribution to make and moral experts (whoever they might be) have achieved comparable success. We will very probably never have a logic of moral discourse that would enable us to create a body of knowledge analogous to that of the sciences. Whether we eventually do or not for now we must work with such principles and more particular intuitions as we have, refining them through an exploration of their implications and interrelationships, and thereby bringing the whole into a coherent form which reflects our considered view of what is morally appropriate to the human condition. This is not second-order reflection upon morality: it is the first-order construction of morality; and it is largely the philosophical demand for clarity and consistency which gives the process its rational character. It is inevitable that in this process certain propositions will emerge as logically fundamental positions -- i.e., they will provide the justification of other judgements but they will not themselves be capable of justification. The realization that certain views have this ultimate status in our moral consciousness undermines neither the importance nor the rationality of constructing an integrated and detailed moral outlook; and fundamental to the latter will be a concern about what becomes of our children and hence about what they should or should not learn. Finally, our lack of powerful empirical



theories about educationally relevant matters, like our lack of moral knowledge, provides no reason for detachment with regard to such matters on the part of the philosopher. It indicates merely that we should be alert to the rather shaky basis which our empirical assumptions sometimes have in educational debate.

So the business of forming an evaluative conception of education is an intellectually respectable one for which the philosopher is well-equipped if anyone is. And if he still jibs at the idea of recommendation there is a dodge that will enable him to undertake the task at hand in good faith. He can preface his attempts to elaborate an evaluative conception with the caveat that the value judgements upon which it hinges are ultimately articles of faith, and hence that he cannot recommend their adoption qua philosopher in the way that he could recommend rejection of some logically muddled theory. If it assuages his conscience he can say that he conceives himself as anatomizing a substantive moral viewpoint, in a suitably neutral fashion, rather than setting forth such a position with the object of affecting what people do. Of course, this modest caveat will make no significant difference to what he actually does. Given the neutral viewpoint, the philosopher will want us to interpret sentences expressing moral judgements in his writings not as actual moral assertions on his part but as his attempts to describe the position of those who would assert them -- including, perhaps, the philosopher when he is not speaking in his professional capacity. Thus instead of baldly stating that the principle of respect for persons is the foundation of morality this sentence might be re-cast into a descriptive form: "Liberals believe that the foundation of





morality is the principle of respect for persons." But with or without these manoeuvres one's readers, as moral beings interested in how they should conduct their lives, will presumably respond to these sentences in the same way. Seen in this light the issue of ethical neutrality in philosophical analysis looks like much ado about nothing.

### Children's Rights and Education

It is commonly assumed, though less often openly asserted, that children constitute a sort of private property to be disposed of by parents, within humane limits, in the exercise of their right as adults to self-determination. Charles Fried has recently argued that "the right to form one's child's values, one's child's life-plan and the right to lavish attention on the child are extensions of the basic right not to be interfered with in doing these things for oneself."<sup>9</sup> The enormous difficulty of this position lies in the fact that the putative right to shape one's child according to personal preference may very easily undermine the right which the child will come to possess as an adult to shape his own values and life-plan. If Jones's parents have done a thorough job of inculcating in their offspring unquestioning commitment to some personal ideal then will their actions not rightly appear in retrospect as a violation of his right to self-determination when he is an adult psychologically incapable of seriously considering competing ideals? I am inclined to say that Jones's rearing violated his right in much the same way as indoctrination or brain-washing by agents of the state would. Whether one's capacity for independent judgement is destroyed by



Big Brother or one's dear parents does not much matter, morally speaking. It is difficult, to put it mildly, to see how a special biological relationship could warrant a loosening of those moral obligations which we believe would otherwise apply in a relationship between child and adult. If anything the fact of parentage would seem to call for more rather than less constrictive obligations in one's relations with a child.

Admittedly, we are generally reluctant to interfere in parent-child relations whereas we feel free to regulate, often in very stringent ways, the dealings which other adults, such as teachers, have with children; and one may feel that this reluctance has a moral basis. (I suspect that it is this which gives Fried's position some intuitive plausibility.) But a liberal defense of this reluctance can be put forward which avoids the ludicrous view that parents have a right to treat children in ways that we would find morally appalling if they were not parents. Where the state, for instance, tries to force parents not to instil their children with unshakeable and uncritical convictions the policy would be often liable to disrupt parent-child relations in a way that is damaging for the child. If a parent sees it as an essential part of the good life to infect his offspring with some of his own irrationality and if his efforts in this direction are impeded by the state then the filial relationship is likely to become infused with disappointment and frustration. For many adults, unfortunately, their capacity to give the positive regard their child needs may be largely contingent upon their being free to make the child in their own unprepossessing image. The liberal state certainly should take steps to limit this freedom -- compulsory



schooling, in particular, may serve as a useful corrective to this form of oppression -- but there may come a point when external interference in the parent-child relationship, even where it seems necessary to forestall an obvious evil, does more harm than good. Thus we can justify an aversion to highly restrictive legislation pertaining to child-rearing practices while keeping the rights of the child firmly in the centre of the picture.

The inadequacy of Fried's position illustrates a quite general point about human rights: if we take the rights of adults seriously we have to take those of children seriously. Since the rights of an adult can be effectively vitiated by what happens to him as a child they must be protected by ascribing moral entitlements to the child which often carry comparable moral weight. It might be objected that this argument exploits an ambiguity in the idea of violating or undermining a right because there is a difference between behaving towards someone in a way that violates a right he currently has and treating him in a manner that partly or wholly disables him from availing of a right he comes to possess later on. If only adults possess some sort of right to autonomy or self-determination, as Fried assumes, a parent who indoctrinates his child to rigidly adhere to some disputable ideal is guilty of the latter but not the former. This distinction can undoubtedly be made but the real question is whether or not it captures anything of moral importance. It clearly does not. The moral point of ascribing rights to persons is to protect their capacity to live meaningfully from unjustifiable interference by others in the pursuit of individual or collective goals. From this perspective the destruction of an individual's potential for





critical judgement prior to his becoming an adult is *ceteris paribus* an evil of equal magnitude to the destruction of his realized critical faculty as an adult. Why should the time at which a harm was inflicted matter if its effects are ultimately the same in depriving a mature human being of the ability to think for himself?

However there are serious difficulties in seeing the rights of children as wholly derivable in this way from those of adults. Suppose that I have murdered a child. Since I thereby prevent him from becoming an adult who possesses rights it cannot be said that I have thereby prevented him from using any right he will possess later on as an adult. Therefore his right to life as a child -- if he has one -- cannot be established as instrumental to any rights he will come to possess as an adult. It is difficult to see how we could justify the assignment of a strong right to life to children unless we argue that children themselves, regardless of whether they become adults or not, are an appropriate object of this entitlement.

I assume that the various rights of persons are each a partial specification of what is required by their fundamental right to equality of consideration and respect, and this general right is grounded upon the capacity they have to live meaningfully. Now children -- and most conspicuously younger children -- do not enjoy lives that we would ordinarily recognize as fully significant. Favourable evaluations in this area are more accurately expressed through adjectives such as "full", "happy", "rich", and so on. The concepts of attraction and aversion apply to the young child's mental activity as brute notions, unconnected with the value judgements implicit in the interests and temptations of persons. His life lacks the overall shape given by



long-term plans and projects since a core self has yet to crystallize in the form of an inter-related system of dispositional interests, and a fortiori autonomous selfhood is impossible for him. For these reasons it is apparent that a child, unlike an adult who regresses to a life of animal satisfactions and moral indifference, is incapable of living meaningfully. That is to say, he presently lacks the characteristic which provides the very ground for ascriptions of rights to adults. This may suggest that we should see the rights of the child as purely instrumental to the maintenance of adults' rights, despite the counter-intuitive view of the child's right to life which this position involves; but we are not necessarily driven into this corner. We can argue, perhaps, that the child's life is continuous, in some deep moral sense, with that of the adult he will become provided untoward events do not cut his life short; and so although his capacity to live meaningfully is at best only partly actualized at present, this unfolding potential entitles him to a degree of moral concern equal to that which full persons merit, irrespective of whether he ever does become an adult. If this position can be successfully defended the child's rights would still be derived from those of the adult in so far as the child's developing capacity for meaningful living would justify their ascription; but they would not be derivative in the sense of being purely instrumental to the preservation of adults' rights.

However, I do not want to make too much of the distinction between the instrumental and non-instrumental theories. I am inclined to favour the latter because it puts the child's moral entitlements on a more secure footing but, leaving aside the difficulties surrounding



the right to life, it seems clear that both theories imply that children should be treated in much the same way. For the exponent of the instrumental theory the child is entitled to be treated in ways that secure the rights he will possess as an adult. Securing these rights means more than ensuring that he will come to possess them as formally recognised entitlements. Efforts are required to enable the child to become a being capable of using his rights so as to enjoy a significant life. The moral duties we assign to parents are merely the most conspicuous recognition of the need for such efforts. Thus the child's developing capacity to live meaningfully has to be fostered carefully. What this means I shall consider presently. The point to be emphasized here is that the non-instrumental theory indicates precisely the same general approach to how we should treat the child.

Now whether or not a human being lives meaningfully will be enormously dependent on what he has learnt. The interests which constitute the core of the self, including the moral interest, are outcomes of learning, as is the ability to develop this system with realism and independence of mind. From the liberal viewpoint one might say that educational processes are activities of learning which conduce to the realization of a meaningful life, as the liberal conceives such a life. To have been successfully educated is to have learnt what one needs to be and know to live in this way, at least under ordinary circumstances. A great deal of fundamental learning in this area will occur fortuitously in the context of familial relationships in early childhood: the individual will come to conceive his world as an ordered whole in which planning and foresight matter, he will begin to develop a sense of self-esteem through the love of







others, and so on. But this is not my concern here. Like most educational philosophers my preoccupation is with that part of education which takes place in the school, or that would take place in any institution that might replace schooling. The central (though not the exclusive) purpose of schooling has commonly been conceived as the teaching of desirable knowledge which cannot be readily picked up in the family or neighbourhood. The liberal will not deny this but his conception of education commits him to specific views as to how knowledge should be acquired and what sort of knowledge it should be. He will regard schooling -- or any institution with the same purpose that might supplant it -- as educational to the extent that it facilitates the achievement of knowledge through developing the child's interests in a context wherein autonomy and the moral interest are encouraged. I shall defer consideration of the way in which the aim of fostering autonomy and the moral interest will affect the educational process -- this will be discussed later in the chapter. My aims in the following section are to clarify the idea that education is centrally concerned with the development of the individual's interests, to point out some of its more important practical implications, and to exhibit its logical connection with the liberal moral viewpoint.

### Developing Interests

There is an important distinction to be drawn between merely pursuing or sustaining an interest and actually developing one. The distinction consists in the different relations which these activities have to the acquisition of knowledge.



Suppose I have an interest which I actively sustain but have ceased to develop. I play chess from time to time and occasionally attend a tournament or read a book on the subject. But my interest in the game, which may indeed be strong, is essentially static. The level of skill I have attained is one I am not prepared to improve through any prolonged and serious effort, and though I might study the games of others with interest, I am neither seeking nor achieving a more profound understanding of chess than the one I currently enjoy. I am content with the possibilities of rewarding experience which my current interest affords: I do not want (or want enough) to realize those possibilities that might be opened up by deepening it. In playing chess and studying the performances of others I will certainly pick up some extra knowledge, but this will be just what is necessary to achieve familiar satisfactions. My interest will not involve me in what might be called serious inquiry: i.e., learning directed to the achievement of a deepening appreciation of the object of interest.

It is obvious that very many of the interests of human beings have this static quality. In fact, probably most of them can be actively maintained in a manner that is more tenuously related to the attainment of knowledge than my example might suggest. The interest one has in a certain personal relationship, say, might be wholly expressed in activities which involve no increase of knowledge either about the other or about oneself. However, whether the pursuit of a particular interest involves some accession of knowledge or none at all, if it has become static its place in one's life will be that of a more or less predictable and repetitive pattern of experience since in either case serious inquiry will have been arrested.



The development of an interest, on the other hand, logically cannot take the form of predictable and repetitive experience because it is precisely the process of finding new possibilities of rewarding experience in the activities appropriate to one's interests. It is necessarily a matter of serious inquiry because it must involve discovering more about the potential one's interest has as one ingredient of a personally meaningful life. At least in this mode of expressing interest knowledge must be sought. It is only through knowledge that sporadic curiosity about natural phenomena becomes the full blown passion for truth of the natural scientist or, to take an example less obviously cognitive in origin, only through greater understanding of the other can interest in a personal relationship be deepened.

It is not my intention to contrast the pursuit of interests with their development as if the former were inevitably a dull and dreary business whereas the latter inexorably brings greater and greater satisfactions. The contrast is much more complicated than that. In the first place, the growth of an interest may be halted when it is already highly developed, and for that reason its pursuit may continue to afford a rich and varied range of experience which is personally fulfilling to a high degree. If my interest in the arts ceases to develop at a stage when I can deeply appreciate the music of Mozart, the drama of Shakespeare and the paintings of Michelangelo, then my aesthetic experience, although somewhat predictable and repetitive, may continue to contribute profoundly to the felt significance of my life. And it would seem that for most scholars and artists the development of interest in their discipline more or less ceases at a certain stage. A general style or certain unquestioned





assumptions take shape and closely circumscribe further work done in the discipline. But it would be ridiculous to suppose that their work becomes a tedious task at this point, either for them or for us. Furthermore, the attempt to develop an interest is not necessarily successful. It may turn out to be wasted effort: the potential I thought it contained just was not there, for me at least. It may also be damaging effort, disrupting one's plan of life in serious ways.

There is certainly one legitimate conception of the good which suggests that human beings should constantly strive to develop their interests (or some favoured interest) to the utmost in order to live with the maximum vigour and intensity of which they are capable. But the liberal's hostility to the aggrandizement of constrictive ideals is clearly pertinent here. Why should we favour this sort of life over others? Why are lives that place emphasis upon the values of repose, stability and familiarity inferior to those that are closer to the more dynamic ideal? The liberal viewpoint does not entail that these are unimportant questions nor that correct answers cannot be found. His point is rather that the individual must confront them for himself, without paternalistic interference from others, since the appropriate answer will depend on idiosyncracies of temperament and personal history. After all, it is the felt significance of the individual's life that is at stake. (You will note that the very formal idea of autonomy is compatible with either dynamic or static ideals.) Thus it is not the aim of education to set children off on the road to knowledge with Wittgensteinian intensity, but neither is it our task to discourage that quest.



However, although the liberal will resist attempts to accord a privileged social position to either dynamic or static ideals, through educational practices or other means, he can still justify the importance he attaches to the schooling of children as a process primarily concerned with the acquisition of knowledge. The liberal justification will depend upon the following thesis: other things being equal, it will be better for an individual if an interest that he has is more rather than less developed. It should be emphasized that this implies nothing about the value of dynamic or static forms of life. The more developed interest may be static while the less developed is still in a process of growth.

To justify this thesis it is crucial to clearly grasp what it means to have created a more developed or deeper interest than one previously had. In analysing the concept of dispositional interests I showed that they are logically tied to beliefs about what is personally worthwhile in one's life and that this belief is in part grounded upon intrinsic features of the activities which can express one's interest. More precisely, these activities afford experiences that are inherently rewarding. To have developed an interest is to have discovered a more fertile area for such experience than one had previously had access to in the activities marked out by the interest. This sort of personal change is doubtless a slow and gradual process as a rule, but its nature is perhaps more vividly exemplified on those occasions when it is effected through a quantum leap. A lecture I attend on a philosophical topic I had previously regarded as unspeakably tedious suddenly opens up a new range of deeply fascinating problems for me. I come away not only understanding more about



philosophy but also with an awareness of my interest (and hence my life) as having a greater potential for worthwhile experience than it had previously had. My world feels a bit more interesting than before and to that extent, other things being equal, the liberal will want to say my life is more objectively significant. He will want to say this because, as I argued earlier, the felt significance of a life is a function of the degree of interest one finds in it; and for the liberal at least, the greater the felt significance of a life, once the requirement of moral adequacy is met, the greater will be its objective significance.

The *ceteris paribus* clause in the thesis I have tried to justify calls for some comment. There are a variety of reasons that can make a given interest preferable in an undeveloped rather than a developed condition. Moral and prudential objections may be decisive here; and because conscientious effort is no guarantee that development will in fact occur, the fact that someone chooses to maintain an interest in a rather primitive state is not necessarily cause for regret. Nevertheless, the thesis would seem to justify the importance in a liberal state of institutions designed to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge by individuals in the development, and not merely the pursuit, of their interests. For such institutions, insofar as they effectively serve their purpose, will be an important means by which citizens can come to enjoy more meaningful lives. They will have value for human beings of all ages, but there is a strong case for saying that for children they will be especially important. The issue of compulsory schooling, which has attracted so much attention in recent years, will be the theme of the final chapter. For the





present I want to stress that whether we decide that compulsory attendance is desirable or not it is clear that access to educational institutions is likely to be a rather more urgent need for the child than for others. Unlike the normal adult in our culture all the child's interests are in a primitive state and he is likely to know little or nothing about how to develop them. One excess of the radical tradition of educational thought has been a tendency to think of the child as a natural inquirer, full of intense interest, whose spontaneous interaction with the world must not be interfered with by meddling adults. What is ignored here is the fact that initial wonder at the mystery of things, which is quite rightly associated with childhood, may easily degenerate into indifference towards the inexplicable unless the satisfaction of understanding is achieved through the help of a sensitive adult. The familial and neighbourhood setting may (but then again it may not) be helpful in this area. But it seems likely that without institutions designed specifically to foster the acquisition of knowledge, as opposed to those that may or may not meet this need sporadically and incidentally, primitive interests are likely to remain fairly primitive if they do not atrophy altogether. The core self which forms in the frustration of ignorance is likely to be a poor realization of an individual's potential for meaningful living, and later opportunities may not compensate for early deprivations.

If my life is shaped by rudimentary interests its scope for interesting experience is by definition very narrow, and even if I have come to feel happy with what I have it may still be regarded as tragically little. There is nothing tragic, though there is



something very strange, in the situation of someone who chooses to spend his life harmlessly engaged in some autistic endeavour with access to and rational awareness of the wider possibilities of experience contained in other forms of life. It is difficult to conceive of such cases because our ordinary understanding of human nature suggests that in apparent instances the condition of rational awareness is unlikely to be satisfied -- i.e., some defect of mental health has determined the "choice". But such cases are not inconceivable and if they do occur they merely illustrate the unpredictability of human nature: for some people, it would seem, the best life possible is found in decidedly bizarre circumstances. However, where the primitive quality of a person's interests is to be explained by a failure to obtain access to knowledge that would have developed them then here we are confronted with a recognizable evil. Such an individual is not, *ex hypothesi*, someone with a more or less fully realized but singularly limited capacity for meaningful experience. He is someone whose capacity in this area has been cut short through a failure to transcend his own ignorance. Knowledge is power -- but in a larger sense than Bacon ever supposed. It is not just the indispensable tool of technological man. It is also our only means of coming to live in a more interesting world. To conceive education as centrally a process of developing the individual's interests is simply to recognize the fundamental ethical importance of this use of knowledge.

It might be objected that in the case of children it is not clear why developing their interests is so important. According to both the instrumental and non-instrumental theories of children's



rights the point of according moral entitlements to the child is to ensure an environment in which, within the limits of available resources and the morally legitimate claims which others have upon them, the child's potential as a being capable of living meaningfully will be actualized. If his education is successful he will have been enabled to become someone whose interests are fairly highly developed and can be pursued or developed further in a realistic and independent-minded fashion. This goal, in so far as it is achieved through education, is an outcome of the educational process and so, it might be argued, its desirability does not entail that interest has to be characteristic of the child's learning within the educational process. Those who see the child's interests as a *mélange* of the trivial, the imprudent, and the downright immoral will be comforted by this argument as will those who, despite some genuine liberal sentiments, see the main function of schooling as behavioural control and regard pervasive student apathy merely as the main obstacle to such control. We want our children to enjoy the interests of educated adults, eventually, or so the argument goes, but for the present our limited aim must be to instill in them the information and skills which are relevant to these interests. I suspect that this sort of argument often underlies the current fad for so-called competency-based education.

There certainly is room within the educational process for attempts to originate new interests in children, and while they are being made the learning that occurs may not be immediately interesting to the child. Yet they may be successful and where this has been the case the initially uninteresting learning can be described as





educational to the extent that it was causally efficacious in the emergence of interest. I will have more to say about the pedagogical value of making such attempts and the very stringent limitations that should apply to their use. However, it must be conceded that what is experienced as an uninteresting learning sequence can have educationally desirable consequences, and therefore interest does not necessarily characterize learning at every point in the educational process. However, education as an achievement -- educatedness, as some contemporary writers inelegantly call it -- is continuous with education as a process. The educated man is not the outcome of a metamorphosis which the learner undergoes at the termination of his schooling. Being educated consists in achievements which are gradually realized within the educational process. One cannot consistently conceive the educated man as someone who possesses developed interests of a certain sort unless one also believes that becoming educated is a process of developing these interests. In other words, given the nature of education as an achievement, learning within the process itself must at least normally be interesting, even though the interest that is involved will be relatively unsophisticated at first. After all, a developed interest is not a mysterious psychological phenomenon which tends to erupt suddenly after a long and disagreeable period of learning. An educated woman may not have cultivated her deep interest in science through learning which always interested her. But how could she ever have such an interest unless initial indifference had given way to learning which was increasingly interesting?<sup>10</sup>

These rather obvious facts would seem to justify the gravest disappointment about the extent to which contemporary pedagogical



practices are educational. When a student completes his schooling without having developed any interest in what he studied there -- and this is a sadly common occurrence -- then his schooling has clearly been somewhat of an educational disaster. Later in life he could become interested in one of these studies, and what he has learnt at school might be involved somehow in bringing this about. Remembering a passage of Shakespeare one has been obliged to learn by heart might help to arouse a passion for the author long after one's school days. On the other hand, being forced to spend lengthy periods studying what is personally repugnant or just inherently boring would seem rather more likely to inculcate a settled aversion to the object of study. And, of course, while one is undergoing this ordeal the educational possibilities of his current interests remain unexplored. Even if it were shown that schooling quite often stimulates interests that emerge later in life this can hardly justify complacency concerning the utter lack of interest with which so many children respond to their curricula. The educational value of schooling becomes intolerably chancy if its realization can be deferred to some indefinite future when, hopefully, the tasks students are compelled to undertake in the present will be efficacious in originating new interests.

The claim that education should be based on the psychological interests of children has become a rather familiar one. But the idea which I am recommending here -- that education is centrally a matter of developing the individual's interests -- is commonly confused with other rather silly educational doctrines. I suspect that these confusions are responsible for many of the pedagogical disasters that



have been perpetrated in the name of students' interests, and that they also underlie the illusion, so common nowadays, that competency-based schooling represents the only realistic theory of what that institution can do. The confusions I have in mind pertain both to the nature of interests and to the proper role which these should play in the educational process. It is worth the effort to examine these confusions since they are so common and since they detract from the persuasiveness of the position I wish to defend.

It is often vaguely suggested that education should be based on the learner's interests, wants, purposes, or some other characteristic of mind closely related to interest, as if no important distinctions were to be made between these various mentalistic concepts. In the influential writings of John Dewey, whose capacity to obliterate important distinctions is truly awesome, this confusion is especially prominent. In Democracy and Education the meanings of aim, intent, end, interest, affection, concern and motivation are conflated in a semantic pot-pourri: differences in emphasis are supposed to be the only significant distinctions between the first three concepts and the last four.<sup>11</sup> It would be tedious to discuss how interests are to be distinguished from the various things with which they are liable to be confused, and if a satisfactory analysis of interest has already been offered it would be unnecessary anyhow. But it must be understood that the demand for accuracy and clarity in the use of these concepts is of the utmost practical importance because failure in this respect may utterly frustrate attempts to implement the liberal conception of education. It can be extremely damaging, for example, to misunderstand the connection between dispositional interests and occurrent wants. I







have already discussed the nature of this relation in the previous chapter: wants commonly (though not always) reflect dispositional interests in the sense that wants are often adequately explained, for the purposes of practical discourse, by a motivating dispositional interest. Now it is easy to fall into the trap of supposing that this connection is rather closer than it actually is -- one might assume that the individual's wants always reflect underlying interests. In that case, letting the child do just as he wants, without any outside interference, will necessarily be a matter of letting him do what interests him. If interest-based education is conceived as a process of facilitating children's efforts to do simply what interests them then we have arrived at a radically permissive philosophy of education. The child is being educated whenever he is doing just what he wants and the facilitating role of the adult is to get out of the way. An indiscriminate deference to children's wants is hardly likely to promote their self-realization. Thus given a conceptual error about the relation between interests and wants it is easy to come to see interest-based education as a pernicious doctrine which no sensible adult, liberal or otherwise, could endorse.

In the example I have just considered misunderstanding of the concept of interest is combined with a further error -- viz., the mistake of supposing that as educators we should simply let children pursue their interests without interference. Even if we change this into the slightly more plausible proposition that we should help children to do so what we have is still unsatisfactory. For it is obvious that to just pursue one's interests, where these are at a primitive stage of development, may lock one in a pattern of repetitive



activity which offers a range of meaningful experience far more limited than he is capable of enjoying. Within institutions of learning there is doubtless a role for the pursuit of interests when this involves the seeking of knowledge, but for children our main objective must be to develop interest rather than merely indulge it in its current, inevitably limited form.

The educational significance of the distinction between pursuing and developing an interest has rarely been appreciated. Even in P.S. Wilson's very acute writings on child-centred education it is not clearly understood because of Wilson's faulty analysis of the concept of interest. For Wilson being interested is "wanting to know more" provided the desire has not been artificially created through extrinsic incentives or disincentives.<sup>12</sup> By connecting interests so closely with the achievement of knowledge the distinction between their pursuit and development is blurred. One could not, given Wilson's definition, be pursuing an interest by engaging in a repetitive pattern of activity without any accession of knowledge. This is plainly counter-intuitive. Wilson would probably acknowledge that his analysis is stipulative, but this is an area where stipulation is both unnecessary and damaging. He merely succeeds in obscuring the important point that if schooling were given over to just facilitating the pursuit of children's interests, as "interest" is ordinarily understood, then schooling would commonly be just an effective means of keeping them ignorant.

The distinction which Wilson fails to appreciate also enables us to construct a decisive reply to those who reject interest-based education on the grounds that the interests of children are too often



primitive and undesirable to provide a satisfactory focus for the educator. It is precisely because a child's interests are apt to be primitive and undesirable that they are likely to stand in need of appropriate development. And one does not meet this need by ignoring his interests -- except perhaps as a factor to be exploited in motivational tactics -- and trying instead to simply make him competent and knowledgeable in certain socially approved respects. The great danger of contemporary competency-based schooling, for example, is that it may be entirely successful in the program it sets itself, and hence be hailed as a great educational success, while the capacity for interesting experience of the "well-educated" individuals it produces remains virtually unaltered by their schooling. The academic careerist who sees his scholarly competence just as an instrument for personal advancement is not, after all, a rarity. One can very easily become competent or knowledgeable without developing any interest whatever. From the liberal viewpoint, the disaffected adolescent drop-out represents an educational failure for the schooling system, but so too do his industrious but uninterested classmates.

My idea of interest-based education might be criticised on the basis of another, apparently liberal view of what children need to learn. It is commonly argued that there is a body of knowledge and skills which will inevitably have considerable instrumental value for the individual regardless of whether or not he finds it interesting per se. Whatever goals a man might choose there are certain things he must know and be able to do if he is not to be seriously inhibited in achieving a meaningful life in our society. I might find reading, say,





to be a rather bothersome chore which offers no intrinsic satisfactions, but my possession of this skill is nonetheless immensely useful in enabling me to pursue my own purposes effectively. Where knowledge of this sort is difficult to casually acquire outside schooling and is best acquired early in life there would seem to be reason for making it the core of any curriculum we could devise for the child. And since its educational value is not contingent upon its being found interesting in itself, the fact that pupils might respond to such a curriculum with apathy does not really matter, provided they can achieve the desirable level of mastery.

The extent of knowledge which has this sort of guaranteed utility is very limited. A fairly high degree of literacy is a very plausible candidate for this status and a good case could probably be made out for a modest level of numeracy, along with an amount of information about sexual matters and perhaps one's legal rights. If this is to form the core of the curriculum it will form a very small core -- unless it is taught with monstrous inefficiency. Thus even if the argument considered here were cogent it would establish only an important supplement to interest-based learning in the school; and if this element of the curriculum were adequately dealt with it should not figure prominently in a child's schooling. Furthermore, I suggest that it is unnecessary and damaging to conceive the curriculum as comprising two parts: one given over to basic knowledge and skills, to be learnt irrespective of individual preferences; the other concerned with developing personal interests through knowledge that is adjusted to what each child needs to know in this respect. It is unnecessary to make this dichotomy because the value of the



basic knowledge depends on the fact that when an individual's interests have been developed to a certain degree, failure to acquire it will seriously impede the further pursuit and development of these interests. The acquisition of basic knowledge is thus a natural off-shoot of interest-based education, not a radically different component of the educational process. To dichotomise the curriculum in this way is also harmful because it disguises the immediate personal relevance which the acquisition of basic knowledge has to the individual learner and thereby undermines the motivational basis which learning has in this area. It is hardly surprising that a very small store of information and skill may take twelve years of public schooling to assimilate when its personal relevance is at best dimly perceived.

The question of how we should implement interest-based education, in its most significant sense, is one to which empirical research has obvious relevance. But given an understanding of what this sort of education is we can begin to delineate the sort of pedagogy which it will demand. The details of the picture, so to speak, can be left to the empirical researcher.

The most basic task for the teacher will be the correct identification of the learner's interests since it is this dimension of his being that stands in need of education. P.S. Wilson has written with sensitivity on some of the difficulties involved in this process.<sup>13</sup> What a child professes to be an interest of her, for example, may not actually be one even if there is no conscious intention to deceive. Self-deception is all too easy here. The pupil who claims and appears to be voraciously interested in just



about anything one might teach her may actually be possessed by nothing more than a consuming desire to satisfy the aspirations of her academically ambitious parents. Lack of self-knowledge may prevent the realization that what she is being taught is not really interesting, and if the teacher fails to understand the child well enough he may fail to perceive this as well. The behavioural correlates of interest, which are not the same as interest, are very easily misconstrued unless they are interpreted in the light of a fairly thorough understanding of the individual who exhibits the behaviour. A general knowledge of child psychology and of the child's cultural background may help one to form tentative expectations as to what her interests will be and thereby expedite identification. But this cannot replace the knowledge that is only possible through familiarity with a particular individual because it is particular individuals, not psychological and cultural stereotypes, who need to be educated. For most of the ordinary purposes of life we can classify the interests of others in a crudely general fashion, ignoring the idiosyncracies of preference which our imprecise labels disguise. In a crowded classroom with a teacher who is no better than competent it may be difficult to advance beyond this stage of crude classification; and so there will be a corresponding roughness in the adjustment of curriculum to individual interests. This is not educationally desirable, but it is preferable to a situation in which the adjustment is likely to be entirely accidental if it exists at all.

It must be stressed that the problem of identification cannot be successfully resolved once and for all. Having arrived at a





detailed understanding of what interests a pupil at a specific point in time I cannot just set up a suitable curriculum and then forget about her subsequent response to the knowledge as she acquires it. A curriculum that is well-tailored to develop one's interests at a certain period does not necessarily serve the same purpose well at a later date because the particular self for whom it was originally designed is not temporally inert. As we acquire new knowledge old interests disappear or are radically altered and new ones emerge. What counts as educative learning for an individual will vary in accordance with these changes in the self; hence a curriculum that truly educates must take account of them. The dynamic aspect of selfhood is especially evident in the younger child since his interests are liable to be multifarious and transitory. Hirst and Peters note this fact in defending their view that children's interests should not determine curriculum content.<sup>14</sup> However, it is difficult to see how this fact supports their view unless a curriculum determined in this way is interpreted as one in which interests are passively indulged. As we have seen, another interpretation of such a curriculum is available to us. For a skilled teacher who knows his charges well -- and has adequate resources at his disposal -- the selection of curriculum content which will transform puerile interests into a more enduring and developed form should not normally be difficult. Moreover, the very diversity of these rudimentary interests constitutes an educational advantage. The knowledge and intimations of rewarding experience that are achieved while briefly exploring various avenues of inquiry will be a useful corrective to any tendency towards tunnel vision which premature absorption in a



single pursuit might induce.

Any child will require a special relationship with an educator so long as he is ignorant of how best to develop his interests, is unable to do so on his own and is lacking, perhaps, in the self-knowledge to see them clearly for what they are. The appropriate emotional tone of this relationship is determined by the educator's need for a continuous understanding of the learner. Specifically, the child has to feel enough confidence and trust in the teacher to reveal his ongoing response to the learning tasks he undertakes. (Self-disclosure, of course, will be at least as much a matter of what the child unself-consciously does, in the company of an adult he trusts, as in what he says.) The teacher cannot be an aloof and threatening figure, to be placated through feats of industry and feigned interests if he is to educate effectively. Admittedly, in the radical tradition of educational thought we find equally inappropriate images of the teacher: the passive custodian of educational resources or the child's co-inquirer, virtually indistinguishable from the pupils he supposedly teaches. As a critical response to the ideal of the teacher that has dominated traditional schooling these images are wide of the mark. They depend upon the false assumption that what is wrong with the traditional ideal is simply an excessive emphasis on pedagogical direction so that all will be made right through pedagogical self-effacement. In fact, the defect of the traditional conception has not been approval of excessive direction but a failure to distinguish the right sort of direction.

The passivity commonly associated with the child-centred



teacher is partly rooted in a theory of the proper method of human learning -- viz., learning by discovery. If the child must literally discover things for himself there is not much for the teacher to do, except perhaps to supply the tools of inquiry and offer a little surreptitious guidance in this direction rather than that. If one has really been taught something, after all, it hardly makes sense to say that one thereby discovered it, unless one is using the word in some very loose or metaphorical sense. The preoccupation with learning by discovery stems from Rousseau's Émile, but if we examine carefully what Rousseau actually says it is clear that his fundamental concern is more accurately described as with verification rather than discovery.<sup>15</sup> It is very important that we do not confuse these two ideas. Whereas "discovery", in its common acceptation, conjures up images of the independent scholar working at the frontier of knowledge or of the ordinary individual uncovering less *recherché* facts with at most minimal help from others, "verification" carries no such connotations. My attempt to verify a certain hypothesis may be controlled at every step by the close guidance of someone who has mastered the relevant procedures of confirmation; and my efforts might be such that I can truly say after some time "I have verified the hypothesis" even though the circumstances of the case make talk of a discovery on my part quite misleading.

The importance of confirmatory activity in interest-based education is easily established. If a child is to become capable of independently developing his interests he must become capable of distinguishing truth and falsehood himself, without uncritical reliance upon the testimony of others. Indeed, the effective pursuit





of most interests will necessitate the use of this capacity rather frequently. It would seem most unlikely, also, that interest could be genuinely developed through "knowledge" which is actually just information taken on trust. And the fact that personal autonomy is an essential educational aim entails that some mastery of the procedures of verification must be an educational objective since the critical disposition of the autonomous mind presupposes such mastery. (I shall have more to say about this a bit later.)

It is important to note that a concern that children should learn to verify claims to knowledge, unlike a desire that they should learn by personal discovery, does not by itself entail any commitment to a particular method of learning. On the face of it, learning which is the direct result of instruction or lecturing might seem incompatible with learning to verify; but a little reflection will dispel this impression. A lecture which is a reasoned defense of a certain philosophical position, say, may evoke from its auditors attempts to detect fallacies and devise counter-arguments. By this means it may contribute significantly to the growth of their ability to test philosophical positions. The liberal educator's aversion to heavy reliance on overtly didactic methods depends largely upon certain fairly plausible empirical assumptions. In the first place, constant instruction may be liable to induce a mental torpor in which interest, if it has ever existed, perishes and the truth becomes confused with what those who are allegedly knowledgeable say. Skill in verification is also unlikely to get very far if the pupil is not frequently confronted with problems which he must try to solve on the basis of independent effort. If the teacher has always been available to



distinguish truth from falsehood without serious thought being required on one's own part then the effort needed to enable one to reliably make the distinction himself may not be put forth. Finally, the need for continuous understanding of the learner which interest-based education creates will hardly be met in a context where his constant role is to listen intently while the teacher instructs. This understanding presupposes an ongoing dialogue which is likely to be inhibited when instruction dominates the educational process.

This brief description of the teacher's role in developing children's interests should provoke serious misgivings about the extent to which current pedagogical practices are educational, but it should also allay any fears that interest-based education would bring about a destructive permissiveness in educational institutions such that teachers could not exercise the beneficent direction that children clearly need. In fact I would argue that educational direction for the child may legitimately extend even further, on some occasions, than what I have already said might suggest since attempts to originate new interests, as well as to develop ones that currently exist, may form an important part of the educational process.

### Originating Interests

Why should we be concerned with initiating new interests in our children? Admittedly, a new interest, like a more developed version of an older one, will normally make one's life feel at least a bit more meaningful. But decidedly illiberal educational practices have sometimes been justified as attempts to originate new interests.



As I noted earlier the inculcation of information and skill into uninterested students for the duration of their schooling has sometimes been regarded as a prerequisite of the mature concerns of educated adults. The proposal that teachers should try to stimulate new interests may thus look suspect from the liberal viewpoint. We are on safer ground, it might be argued, in concentrating our efforts upon children's current interests. The adequate development of these will surely require a great deal of time and energy, and diverting much attention to the dubious goal of cultivating new ones might seem wasteful if not downright anti-educational.

There is clearly some merit to this viewpoint. If the main focus of my teaching is on activities which presently lack any intrinsic appeal for my pupils, but which I want to arouse their interest in, then whatever attention I can give to exploring the educational possibilities of their current interests will be correspondingly limited. Given that we want schooling to facilitate, as best it can, the attainment of a meaningful life for each individual this will be an unreasonable trade-off to make under ordinary circumstances. If a child's current interests have educational potential which can feasibly be realized -- I take it that this will ordinarily be the case -- then it is feasible to educate him, and to help him to realize this potential is necessarily to help educate him. On the other hand, participation in currently uninteresting pursuits will become educational only if it is effective in arousing and sustaining interest or if what is learnt proves useful, at a later date, to the pursuit and development of the learner's interests; and these consequences cannot, quite obviously, be guaranteed in







advance. In many cases these consequences will look decidedly unlikely. Where the greater part -- or even a considerable part -- of an ordinary child's schooling has been taken up with pursuits he regards as inherently tedious we have strong reason to believe that he has not been educated as he should. Moreover, one might suspect that our efforts in this direction are likely to be rather more successful when they occupy a subordinate position in the goals of schooling. I will surely be more receptive to the attempts of another to stimulate a new interest in me when the other is a trusted being who is willing to help me in the development of my existing interests.

The need for such attempts in our dealings with children becomes especially conspicuous under certain circumstances. Because a human being has interests which he wants to pursue it does not follow that he is interested in developing them. A reluctance to undertake tasks that are intellectually exacting, a fear of the risks of failure that are always implicit in the pursuit of knowledge, perhaps the fear of novelty itself -- all these may prevent a child from becoming interested in developing, as opposed to pursuing, his current interests. I cannot conceive of any sensible response a teacher might make to this impasse which would not involve effort on his part to originate in the child a new interest. Of course, where effort of this sort is exerted it may take the form of starting the child on learning activities that are closely related to his present concerns -- this is perhaps the surest way of arousing interest that will sustain some intensive development. But breaking out of a comfortable routine of experience, even if it is into a closely related area, may be initially repellent for the reasons I have



already given; and where this is the case it is surely imperative that the teacher strive to bring about this transition. Otherwise the process of education cannot even begin.

Within contemporary schooling the need to stimulate new interests is often created not by the ineducable nature of the child's existing interests but by the fact that institutional arrangements afford little opportunity to cultivate them. Suppose someone is hired by a school for the specific purpose of teaching a certain subject in a manner that is rather rigidly circumscribed. Her students have had no previous experience of the discipline, or perhaps their experience has been uniformly disagreeable. These are hardly ideal working conditions for someone committed to interest-based education, but they are not hopeless either. It is still possible to teach one's subject in a way that reveals its interest and some accommodation to individual preferences can normally be made even within the confines of rather confining curricula. This suggestion is not as banal as it might initially seem. For I suspect that teachers do not often make deliberate attempts to reveal through their pedagogy the interest of their subject. What is undoubtedly common is "teaching in an interesting manner", which is usually understood as making children enjoy or take pleasure in being taught. A sufficiently entertaining presentation, combined with extrinsic incentives for those who pay attention and learn, may make it very pleasant to acquire knowledge one continues to regard as uninteresting. In other words, whatever interest one finds in the activity of learning pertains to the manner rather than the substance of the process. This is not a satisfactory situation since the child's interests



in being entertained and obtaining rewards are simply being indulged, while what he learns lacks interest per se and hence fails to develop his interests. However knowledgeable he becomes and however pleasant schooling becomes he is not being educated.

It is potentially misleading to speak, as I have done, of teaching so as to reveal the interest of what one teaches. This might be taken to mean that educational subject matter has a sort of built-in interest which is automatically transferred to the minds of attentive pupils when presented appropriately, or that interests in the same object will not differ significantly. Both of these ideas are plainly false. What I have in mind is something altogether more plausible. It is necessarily the case, for instance, that my interest in reading English poetry is similar in important respects to someone who can sincerely claim to "share" my interest. If one looked hard at both dispositions significant differences between them would doubtless become apparent. Perhaps different poets are favoured in each case and I prize certain poetic virtues and deplore certain poetic vices which the other does not. We might find ourselves often in heated debate about the value of poetry. I am inclined to stress the moral import of works of art while the other sees their purely aesthetic dimensions as more important, and so on. But if we can both be accurately described as sharing an interest in English poetry then some common elements will emerge in a more detailed characterization of our interests. We will both surely be persons capable of being more or less deeply moved by poetry; and this emotional impact will be related to the formal properties of poems and their capacity to reflect and interpret human predicaments.





In other words, poetry will be a source of similar, intrinsically rewarding experiences for both of us; and these experiences are what makes poetry interesting, and not merely a harmless diversion or an activity of instrumental value. To teach poetry so as to reveal its interest is to teach it in a manner that is effectively designed to facilitate such experiences for the child. We can speak of "design" here because these experiences, as I indicated, are linked to objective features of poetry. They are not just unpredictable mental events. If a teacher is alert to both the diversity of ways in which poetry can generate worthwhile experiences and to the level of emotional sophistication his pupils have attained, the problem of arousing interest may often be a manageable one even where the children one teaches are initially hostile or indifferent.

The point can be generalized. If one must teach certain subject matter it is imperative that one identify as precisely as possible those characteristics which tend to make it interesting for human beings -- in particular, for human beings who are at the level of understanding that one's pupils have reached. Good teachers have doubtless always worked with a tacit knowledge of these matters, but it would help a good deal if we could make it explicit. Empirical research about what features of a given discipline appeal to experienced devotees and neophytes might give us a surer grasp of how best children could be introduced to it, if that is absolutely necessary, and how best interest might be developed when it has emerged. Meanwhile, a bit of reflection on the part of teachers' about what it is that makes their subject personally interesting, combined with a sensitivity to the child's capacity for appreciation,



may carry us a long way.

It would be appropriate to end this section on a note of caution. The extent to which the interests of children are subject to pedagogical control is apt to be over-estimated. This is a dangerous illusion because once we assume that we can produce interests in others more or less at will we may tend to make this "production process", directed so as to instill the interests we cherish ourselves, the central purpose of education. It is crucial to bear in mind that when I claim to have created, originated, initiated, stimulated or aroused interest in someone else I am really using these verbs in a metaphorical sense. For example, I might originate, in a quite literal sense, a disease in my pet cat by tampering with her food or injecting some injurious substance into her blood-stream. The physical constitution of my cat is such that if I do certain things to her the emergence of disease is virtually certain. For that reason, if I do these things and the disease is contracted it is appropriate to say that I originated or initiated or created it. It would be too weak to say that I merely "helped cause" or "contributed to" my cat's misfortune. In much the same way, "arouse" and "stimulate" have as their appropriate object responses that are virtually determined by the biological constitution of an organism once a certain sort of interaction with the environment occurs. One can arouse fear or sexual passion but one cannot arouse belief or humility. It is easy to assume that our efforts to originate or arouse interest are, in a similar way, attempts to do certain things to the child which will automatically elicit interest, provided we execute the actions properly and are



working with a normal organism -- e.g., one of normal intelligence. But interest in a certain object may flourish despite extremely adverse environmental conditions -- including the direst teaching -- and it may also fail to arise despite the most advantageous circumstances. However skillful we are as teachers there is nothing that we can do that will make a pupil have an intrinsically rewarding experience while reading Shakespeare or grappling with a problem of trigonometry. We never literally originate interests; we merely facilitate their emergence.

Even for those who do not subscribe to a mechanistic interpretation of the teacher-pupil relationship there is a common failure to appreciate this point. J.P. White, for example, argued some time ago that every secondary school student must be initiated into each of the fundamental theoretical disciplines: "None should be allowed to drop any of the disciplines until he is sufficiently inside it to understand why its devotees are devoted to it."<sup>16</sup> There is a sense in which one does not understand why devotees of mathematics, say, are so interested in their subject unless one comes to share their interest to some extent. If mathematics remains a thoroughly uninteresting discipline then, in a certain sense, one does not really see what it is about the subject that makes them devoted. There is a sort of external understanding of mathematics which is possible without either becoming interested in the subject or learning much about it. One might know, in a rather thin sense, why mathematical devotees love their subject simply by being familiar with the sort of reasons they give for their commitment. But it is the richer sort of understanding which White appears to have in mind in this







passage: he wants students to get inside the discipline in a way that approximates the viewpoint of the devotee. Given what I have already said about the pedagogical impossibility of making anyone interested his proposal gives rise to an obvious question. What happens if the pupil, despite our best efforts, fails to achieve the desired point of view in one of the disciplines?

If he is less able at one of them -- mathematics, say -- then far from being allowed to give it up in favour of something with which he can cope, he should be given more, perhaps differently oriented, teaching in the discipline, so that he becomes able at it. Ability in this context is not a given thing but a goal.<sup>17</sup>

There is an assumption here that at least under normal conditions more and more instruction, if it is of the right sort, can be virtually guaranteed to realize the goal of schooling in any discipline. If what we want is to promote a particular level of ability or competence in mathematics or some other subject then this assumption is probably true, provided the level is not too ambitious. For if we have a student of normal aptitude and normal susceptibility to reward and punishment, and if we supply a competent teacher and an effective system of motivational aids, we can be pretty sure to make the student attain at least a modest level of mathematical ability. But mathematical ability is one thing and understanding the discipline in a way that entails some interest in it is another. It is logically possible, though empirically unlikely, that one could become the most able mathematician who has ever lived without ever understanding mathematics in this sense. Conversely, a child who is just being introduced to geometry might experience quickly and intensely something of the fascination and beauty of mathematical problems



despite the fact that his abilities in the area are quite rudimentary. Now if we ask whether or not White's assumption is true when understanding, in the richer sense, is the goal of schooling we find that it clearly is not. We cannot make people understand mathematics as a devotee would because we cannot make them interested in it. A belief in the relentless efficacy of more and more instruction, where the emergence of interest is our goal, is absurd. One might compare it, as a friend of mine once did, to the opinion that a taste for chocolate can always be created by forcing those who are averse to the substance to eat more and more of it. The more time and effort we find ourselves expending in order to arouse a particular interest the more it looks as if we have failed, and had better direct our attention to other areas. We may be able to make our students mathematically competent, as White supposes, but there is no optimum level of competence at which the understanding of the devotee is necessarily achieved. A realistic awareness of our limitations in originating interests should dissuade us from making protracted and futile efforts to achieve that goal, and should focus our energies on the more central goal of developing students' current interests.

### Education for Autonomy

I have argued that from the liberal viewpoint education is mainly, though not exclusively, a matter of developing the individual's interests, at least where the individual is a child. But a human being's interests can be extended in directions which are



undesirable. His own well-being will be poorly served if development proceeds in ways that are contrary to the requirements of realism or independence of mind; and if the moral interest is not adequately rooted in the self an objectively significant life is impossible, however deep a sense of personal fulfilment is attained. As a process that is designed to facilitate meaningful living education must foster the development of interests within the generous limitations set by the need for children to grow into autonomous and morally committed persons. My aim in this section is to clarify how best autonomy could be fostered in the educational process. I shall deal in turn with each of the aspects of autonomy identified in the previous chapter -- realism, independence of mind, and the critical disposition which is presupposed by both.

It is commonly assumed nowadays that if a certain body of knowledge is a desirable object of learning then it should be codified and transformed into an element in a compulsory curriculum. Nevertheless, I doubt if there would be much value in offering children obligatory courses on the subject of realism. For what one needs to know are not the anaemic generalities that might form the content of such a course but how to shape one's own life in a realistic fashion. Abstract truisms will remain just that unless I can see them as illuminating, in some way, the particular predicaments in which I find myself; and one suspects that personal insight of a realistic nature is not ordinarily achieved via any explicitly formulated maxims whatever. Even if that were false it is clear that when the value of knowledge for an individual consists in its application to a particular context then our focus in teaching should





be upon that context. The knowledge which pertains to realism has its relevant context in the overall formation of the child's self through the development and origination of personal interests. As her interests begin to grow a child will need to see for herself that these interests cannot be successfully expressed if every passing whim is indulged, that the intensive development of one of them will require sacrifices relative to others, and that her abilities can be stretched through appropriate effort but nonetheless mark real limits to what can be achieved. And one should stress that if realism is to be established there must be an acceptance of the practical importance of such personal insight since otherwise it will not perform its proper guiding role in the individual's conduct. Within interest-based education opportunities for realistic insight will arise incidentally and frequently as learning proceeds, and the teacher may have a decisive role in facilitating its realization. It is the nature of this role that I want to clarify.

We have to make a distinction between acting in a way that creates a behavioural semblance of realism and acting realistically. Suppose a child regularly engages in activities that are effectively designed to develop certain desirable, though rudimentary interests that he has. The activities are well-adjusted to his nature and are not at variance with the goals of fostering autonomy and the moral interest. While he is occupied with them he suppresses inclinations to desist and undertake less taxing pursuits. Now clearly, such behaviour might be explained in a variety of ways. The child may be merely acting as if he were realistic, his motivation for doing so having nothing to do with realism, or a sufficient explanation might



be found in the fact that he is already a securely realistic being or, what is perhaps most likely, a combination of partly developed realism and certain extrinsic inducements have constituted his motivation. In the case of an immature pupil, for instance, the distinction between interests and temptations will be dimly perceived, even in moments of calm reflection, and easily forgotten under the pressure of a rather urgent desire. The most interesting things may be absurdly impractical projects, and there may be a reluctance to give these up in order to tackle more practicable ones. An immature mind is necessarily lacking in realism, and for that reason children cannot be expected to act in a fully realistic manner. Therefore it might seem that the best we can do as teachers is to make children behave as if they were realistic through the use of various pressures, and hope that the disposition itself will eventually emerge. Indeed, if we do not take this approach the child's ignorance and lack of self-control may lead to disastrous conduct on his part.

Part of the trouble with this is that if all we encourage is a behavioural imitation of realism then what we are very likely to achieve is no more than that. If that is the outcome of our efforts then as soon as the inducements we use to evoke the behaviour are removed, as they must be eventually, the individual's conduct will simply reflect his undeveloped rationality, and he may be expected to suffer accordingly. I do not want to suggest that there is never any point to inducing this sort of behaviour. In order to save a child from prolonged and futile effort or to prevent self-inflicted injury or harm to others it may be justifiable to



get him to act in ways that are in accordance with considerations the rational force of which he cannot really grasp; but it is of the utmost importance that we reveal to the child as soon and as clearly as possible something of the reasonableness of what he is made to do. Understanding the point of a course of action is not an all or nothing matter. An immature mind will be unable to appreciate, as a sensible adult would, the fact that to express certain interests as he aspires to disciplined effort is required, and that a failure to control his occurrent wants will probably bring him personal disaster. But it does not follow that children are wholly incapable of understanding in this area. If it is pointed out to them surely even younger pupils are capable of seeing that perseverance in a particular learning task may yield a satisfaction which would not otherwise have been attained. This is liable to be forgotten, of course, when perseverance is necessary and some inviting distraction arises; but one can always be reminded of what one forgets. By the time they have reached school age the rudiments of realistic thought should normally be apparent in children, at least fitfully. This is the basis of later realism, if it is ever achieved, and we may adopt a form of pedagogy which ignores it or one that is calculated to refine and strengthen it.

Suppose that I persuade a child, by exploiting his admiration of me, to persist in a certain activity or to refrain from initiating some overly ambitious undertaking. The circumstances of the case might make it perfectly clear to me or any reasonable adult that what I induced him to do was best for him; but so long as the child understands nothing of this it is difficult to see how my conduct





will have helped to make him a more realistic being. His ignorance of this matter will mean that he is simply acting out of a sort of blind admiration for me, however reasonable his behaviour might seem. He may eventually discover for himself the rational justification of what he was persuaded to do, but then again he may not. And even if he does, realistic considerations may continue to seem less important than impressing those whom one admires. If realism is intrinsic to our conception of an educated person then realistic thought must be elicited within the educational process, though initially only a primitive approximation will be possible. The child must learn that there are reasons for controlling his occurrent desires and shaping his interests in certain ways which derive from his concern to live a personally significant life; and though such considerations are not always compelling -- they will sometimes, for instance, be properly overridden by the moral interest -- their significance is such that it would be unreasonable to dismiss them in order to take solace in some fantasy or to express some passing but destructive urge. This learning will surely be facilitated if such reasons are made as comprehensible as possible to the child and if their importance is persuasively conveyed; and it is here that the proper role of the teacher becomes apparent.

When discussing the sort of teaching that is appropriate to interest-based education I emphasized the need for a relationship in which a close understanding of the individual child is maintained through an ongoing dialogue between teacher and pupil. The need for this relationship is also evident when our aim is to foster realism. If properly conducted dialogue with an adult will normally be a



basic means by which the child learns to conduct his life in a realistic fashion. In conversation with a teacher he trusts the limitations of a pupil's understanding of why he should do this or that will be expressed without inhibition; and it then becomes possible to rectify these limitations by drawing attention, say, to the likely adverse consequences of a course of action that attracts him, or by clarifying the need he has to temporarily defer gratification while grappling with the difficulties of a problem he is confronted with. Without verbal interaction of this sort it is difficult to see how one could do very much that would help the child to see the force of realistic considerations as they apply to his life. Only through dialogue can one make explicit their exact relevance in a way that is adjusted to the particular limitations of his understanding. Human thought, as Plato aptly suggested, is a conversation which the soul conducts with itself. One should add that it is a dialogue in which the voices of fantasy and ignorance may easily predominate, unless the development of mind is properly directed. In so far as one can show to a child something of the value of realistic considerations in shaping his life then, other things being equal, realism is surely more likely to take its proper place in the dialogue of his own consciousness.

The value of this process does not depend upon our making realistic considerations the decisive determinant of the child's conduct in the particular situations in which we initiate it. I might succeed, to a limited extent, in communicating to a pupil of mine the reasons why some superficially attractive course of action is likely to bring harm upon him if it is persisted in; but his



understanding of these reasons may still be too weak and the attraction of what is harmful too strong to make him act as he should. It may seem therefore, that the dialogue was ultimately ineffectual -- to protect the child's own well-being extrinsic inducements finally prove necessary, just as they would have been had no dialogue taken place. But the purpose of this sort of teaching is not to solve an immediate problem of motivation but rather to foster the long-term development of realism as a mental disposition. Before this disposition has been securely established the individual may be expected to have attained a level at which realistic considerations are only partly appreciated and hence will often be inadequate, by themselves, to ensure appropriate conduct. The fact that someone's thinking functions at this level does not indicate that he cannot profit from rational dialogue. Although it is commonly assumed otherwise, the justification of Locke's famous injunction -- Reason with children<sup>18</sup> -- does not depend on the ludicrous theory that all or most children are already highly responsive to rational persuasion. On the contrary, it is precisely the limitations of their responsiveness in this area which make it important to communicate to them, as vividly as we can, the personal relevance of reason.

To the extent that schooling can encourage mental independence its effectiveness, as in the case of realism, will doubtless largely depend on how well the trait is incidentally facilitated within the process of developing and originating interests for the particular learner, rather than on whatever could be attained through generalized instruction on the subject. A pupil may have learnt to expound eloquently on the nature and value of autonomy, but if schooling has





taught him to carefully adjust his desires and interests to the demands of peers or parental surrogates then what it has helped him to be is dependent-minded. However, it may seem initially problematic as to how mental independence can be significantly advanced through the teacher's role. Indeed, the desirability of trying to do so might appear rather dubious, despite the centrality of autonomy to the liberal viewpoint. There is an argument that the cultivation of independence of mind, like sexual relations, is best deferred until the individual is no longer a child.

By nature the young child's mind is inclined towards dependency: the approval and social desires strongly affect his actions. The early stages of moral consciousness, as traced by developmental psychologists, illustrate this point. The teacher could discourage these desires in his relationship with the child. He might disparage the importance of his approval, urging the pupil to develop his own interests without deference to the opinions of others (including teachers) except where he freely chooses to follow their advice or example. But if what we want is the development of independence of mind this course of action is of doubtful value. For merely by preventing ourselves from becoming a dominant influence in shaping a dependent mind we do not insulate the individual from the influence of those whose advice or example may be less salutary than ours. If the child is already dependent-minded then by abjuring any influence that we might have upon him we merely make him more exposed to that of others. Attempts to establish between teacher and pupil the sort of relationship that is proper to autonomous adults will impose a highly passive role upon the teacher, with all the damaging



consequences that this is likely to involve for the child. Therefore, it can be argued, the cultivation of mental independence ought not to be our aim at least during the early stages of schooling since our efforts in that direction are unlikely to have educational effects. We must acknowledge the empirical fact that children, qua children, are incapable of mental independence and freely exploit their susceptibility to external influences to further their own well-being.

There is a good deal of irreproachable commonsense in the premisses of this argument, but the conclusion to which it leads is nonetheless unwarranted. There is a fallacy here analogous to that which underlies the argument considered earlier in this section, to the effect that we cannot foster realism in our dealings with children. In both cases the argument hinges upon a false dichotomy. The nature of the child is such that in their education a certain desirable mental trait is not immediately attainable (realism or independence of mind). Therefore we should abandon this aim for the time being, our efforts to achieve it being either futile or damaging, and concentrate upon what is psychologically practicable, such as the shaping of "realistic" behaviour or the moulding of a dependent-minded but otherwise exemplary self. So what we are faced with are two rather stark alternatives. Either we let the child go to ruin, while we foolishly strive to achieve the unattainable, or else we fix our attention upon more modest objectives. When we clarify the form of the arguments in this way it is easy to see what is wrong with them. Quite clearly, the options that are open to us as teachers committed to the value of autonomy are not exhausted



by these two possibilities. In the case of realism I have already shown that it is possible to facilitate the long-term development of the disposition while protecting the child from the harm which his current lack of realism may bring, and a similar form of pedagogy is possible in relation to independence of mind.

I assume that a child who has reached school-age will have some grasp of the fact that there are reasons for action other than those created by the social and approval desires. In particular, even the more immature pupils will have an awareness that there are practical reasons which are internal to the activities they might engage in, such as learning tasks, and independent of the satisfactions of approval and oneness with others. To be sure, considerations pertaining to remote or difficult to attain goals will not carry much weight for them, but where the intrinsic value of learning -- as manifest, say, in a gratifying feeling of mastery -- is more readily experienced its relevance as a reason for action will surely be perceived. An increased appreciation of this class of reasons -- we might call them intrinsic reasons -- is obviously of central importance in the development of mental independence. For we might characterize the dependent-minded as beings for whom these reasons have relatively little force. If a person of this sort joins a philanthropic organisation, for instance, it will not be because philanthropy is an expression of a developed moral interest, and as such intrinsically worthwhile, but because some form of the social and approval desires is thereby satisfied. The activities they pursue are mainly chosen as means to approval and social integration rather than for whatever value they might hold in themselves. Their





independent-minded counterparts, on the other hand, are not constricted by this narrowly instrumental attitude since whatever interest they attach to the approval and social desires is merely one among others. Despite the intensity of these desires in the child's life the fact that he has some appreciation of intrinsic reasons makes mental independence a viable long-term goal, even during the early stages of schooling.

The appropriate role for the teacher here is not difficult to discern, and it certainly does not involve an attempt to exert only such influence as might occur in a relationship between independent-minded adults. It will be important to establish a milieu in which a high level of satisfaction for the social and approval desires can be taken for granted. If an individual in whom these desires are strong, such as any young child is likely to be, is placed in a situation where the risk of isolation or disapproval is high then, inevitably, his mental energies will be focused on these risks and the problem of averting them. (This is not an empirical point. There is a close conceptual connection between the extent to which a powerful desire is frustrated, or the extent of fear concerning frustration, and the degree to which the desire becomes a mental preoccupation -- a preoccupation which, by the way, is not always conscious.) A child in this predicament is incapable of giving serious attention to whatever intrinsic attractions his curriculum might hold, given the psychological pressures to which he is subject. It does not follow, of course, that children have to be enveloped in a sort of indiscriminate positive regard which remains perfectly constant whatever they might do. My point is rather that, so far as



possible, fulfilment of the social and approval desires should become part of the background of learning so that the importance of intrinsic reasons can be more readily appreciated. If this is possible the school must become a rather more flexible institution than it is at present, in which the individual can give expression to his individuality without disapproval or isolation.

In the previous chapter I argued that autonomy is intimately linked to a critical disposition. The realistic mind is one that seriously attempts to discriminate truth from falsehood through the use of reason; and mental independence requires at least the capacity to evaluate options in a way that is not governed, either consciously or unconsciously, by the social and approval desires. Without the intellectual virtue of criticism the practical virtues of realism and mental independence cannot be enjoyed. Through fostering the latter in the ways I have suggested we will inevitably make some contribution to the achievement of the former. However, a good deal of a more direct nature can also be done. It is this which I now want to consider.

The proper exercise of criticism entails skill in evaluating ideas, and an appreciation of the importance of such evaluation in the formation of belief. Without these attainments, being critical will degenerate into a resistance to being disabused of one's fantasies. I have argued that a liberal form of schooling will facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, largely through developing the child's interests. One should add that essential to this knowledge will be some command of confirmatory procedures and a sense of their indispensable value to human life. It is not difficult to



characterize the sort of pedagogy that will be in accord with these goals. In classroom discourse there must be a shared recognition of the need to support beliefs -- within practicable limits -- with logically appropriate reasons and to subject these in turn to critical scrutiny. Here again we find that dialogue is likely to be a basic form of teaching because the process of offering reasons and evaluating them is one that surely has to be practised in interaction with other human beings, preferably where at least some are more adept at the activity than oneself, before it can be effectively carried out in the individual consciousness.

What I have called "practicable limits" will curb the extent to which criticism is pursued in relation to any idea that arises within the process of learning. Even where a proposition is reasonably regarded as confirmed or falsified, for the ordinary purposes of human beings, the demand for further grounds can still intelligibly be made, and so on ad infinitum. The pragmatic need to call a halt to criticism at a certain point is thus apparent. A variety of considerations determine when this point has been reached in the context of schooling. As a child develops his interests in a certain direction some propositions will emerge as more educationally important than others, either because they are more immediately interesting to him or have broad explanatory power in the area of inquiry he has entered. A fairly rigorous examination of the grounds for such ideas should commonly be undertaken, given available resources and the extent to which the student is interested in pursuing the matter, whereas more peripheral propositions may be taken for granted.

The need to take a great deal for granted and to sharply





limit criticism in many other instances can perhaps be seen as a necessary evil. But if the cultivation of a critical disposition is our concern then it is necessary that children gradually learn to appreciate the practicable limits of the demand for supporting reasons. We surely want to distinguish being critical from just being impervious to persuasion, and this distinction will have to be elaborated in terms of the critical individual's awareness of when the demand for further reasons, though still intelligible, has become immoderate.

The educational importance of understanding how ideas are to be confirmed or falsified is commonly stressed by modern educationists, including those outside the radical tradition. In P.H. Hirst's celebrated theory of liberal education such understanding constitutes a central goal of the curriculum. According to Hirst, all propositional knowledge (which, oddly enough, he takes to include the arts) can be located within about seven fundamental forms or categories, each distinguished by a criterion of truth which is irreducible to those that apply in the other forms. The goal of liberal education, as Hirst defines it, is to achieve a fairly advanced level of competence in each of the disciplines, though short of what we would expect of a specialist. Specifically, students must attain a secure grasp of the criteria of proof that are appropriate to a particular type of proposition and have an acquaintance with the "major achievements" in each area.<sup>19</sup> For Hirst this sort of curriculum is desirable because the knowledge it provides constitutes the very foundation of rationality. Valuable qualities of mind, such as a critical disposition, are necessarily



acquired through initiation into the forms of knowledge; and the exercise of criticism will be gravely inhibited when knowledge in one or more of the forms is lacking. After all, to be deprived of such knowledge is to be without a fundamental dimension of the rational mind.

Hirst's lucid and closely argued essays have been influential among British philosophers of education, a fact to which their writings on the subject of autonomy amply attest. Thus R.F. Dearden has maintained that a liberal education, in the sense that Hirst stipulates, would form the "logical backbone" of autonomy since it would ensure the range of knowledge that is necessary for autonomous choice.<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein J.P. White has argued that a compulsory curriculum, very similar to that advocated by Hirst, is necessary if a student is to choose an appropriate form of life on the basis of independent and informed criticism.<sup>21</sup>

All these writers believe autonomy to be a central educational ideal, but the sort of schooling they deem to be required by it is extremely different from the kind that I have been describing. Hirst's liberal education would necessitate a curriculum that is largely determined in form and content prior to any consideration of the learner's interests. The rather ambitious level of attainment that is necessary in each of the disciplines would severely limit, for instance, specialization according to interest even at the secondary level of schooling. This may not trouble Hirst since interests do not figure in the abstract cognitive aims of the allegedly liberal curriculum he espouses. But this ought to trouble us since without interest knowledge can hardly be expected to contribute much to the



development of autonomy. A Hirstean liberal education might be a very effective means of fostering the ability to criticise but, as I noted in the previous chapter, this ability is very easily detached from the purposes of realism and mental independence. In addition to mere ability what is clearly needed is a deep personal commitment to discern the truth where it is personally relevant and to live in the light of such personal insight. Without a commitment of this sort the human tendency to fantasy, often guided by the social and approval desires, will inevitably distort the exercise of the critical faculty. Now if the knowledge I acquire through schooling is of no interest to me the truth it embodies is also devoid of interest. In other words, whatever development of the critical faculty is effected through this knowledge will be unrelated to what gives criticism its practical point in my own life. Learning to be critical simply becomes the acquisition of an intellectual skill which is abstract, in a deservedly pejorative sense, because it has become cut off from the growth of an existential commitment to personally relevant truth.

In order to avoid this difficulty it will not do to say simply that we should strive to arouse interest in the content of the curriculum as we compel students to learn. Of course, if one managed to quickly arouse interest over the wide range of such a curriculum and then gradually developed it as one's teaching progressed we would have a liberal education which a liberal could genuinely commend. But the highly structured nature of Hirst's curriculum, together with the idiosyncracies aptitudes and natural predilections of human beings, make it highly unlikely that its





imposition would always or even generally elicit this response. Facile talk about our capacity to "create" interests, such as we find in Hirst's Knowledge and the Curriculum,<sup>22</sup> leads one to overlook this point. However, the frequency with which this form of schooling might or might not evoke interest is not the decisive issue here. The fact is that at least sometimes it will fail to have these desired effects, and when that is the case one might seem to be faced with a dilemma. For if we continue to subject the child to a curriculum which lacks interest for him then, however knowledgeable he becomes, his schooling is manifestly contributing little or nothing to the development of a truly realistic and independent mind. On the other hand, if we allow the child to specialize according to his interests, and thus neglect certain forms of knowledge, the child's mind will be inadequately developed in those basic dimensions of rationality that are enshrined in the neglected forms of knowledge. However, this description of the consequences of specialization merely begs the question of what degree of achievement in the various disciplines is indeed adequate. Hirst, and advocates of similar curricula, do not convincingly show why the extensive initiation into each of the disciplines which they recommend is a condition of adequate mental development, or even a desirable attainment for all or most human beings. At least their arguments fail to carry conviction for a consistent exponent of the liberal viewpoint. From that viewpoint knowledge is valuable for an individual to the degree that it enables him, through the exercise of autonomous criticism, to shape a significant life for himself. I have stressed that an enormous diversity of human lives may satisfy the conditions of such a life,



and only some of these will involve a high degree of intellectual sophistication. The personal value of knowledge is thus highly context-dependent, and a crucial contextual factor will be what interests a particular individual happens to have. If I am somewhat interested in religion, for instance, then what I need to know about religion in order to shape my life through informed criticism is rather different from what someone needs to know who has no such interest. Unless and until interest arises knowledge of religion, if it is assimilated at all, will remain a bundle of inert ideas which contributes nothing to the meaning of my life. Given the relation between knowledge and the meaning of human life, as understood by the liberal, any attempt to formulate a priori a constrictive framework for the curricula of all students, irrespective of the interests they might or might not develop, is bound to be unsatisfactory.

Hirst's transcendental defense of liberal education is based on the claim that one cannot consistently be seriously committed to the value of reason and deny that a liberal education (in the Hirstean sense) is desirable.<sup>23</sup> This is plainly false. The goals of Hirst's curriculum simply represent an approximation to a particular ideal, which is naturally appealing in academic circles -- viz., the ideal of a mind which has a broad and deep understanding of the range of man's intellectual and aesthetic achievement. We have no grounds for believing that reason gives unique sanction to this particular ideal nor can we say that it is built into the notion of autonomy. In a liberal state it merely constitutes one permissible ideal among others, and therefore warrants no privileged position in the



institutions of the state, including the school.

### Moral Education

The topic of moral education has attracted a good deal of attention from educational theorists in recent years, particularly from those who possess some philosophical expertise. Research has been stimulated partly by the recognition that in a society that aspires to be liberal the status of this element in children's education is highly problematical. The attainment and maintenance of a liberal society requires that the moral interest, as conceived by the liberal, be firmly rooted in the social fabric. A liberal society is also one that lays stress on the values of autonomy and rational criticism, and these values have provided a basis for criticism of social practices which instil in the young unshakeable moral and religious convictions. How do we avoid the charge of moral indoctrination while ensuring that certain contestable moral values are perpetuated in the lives of our children? There is a fashionable answer to this question which I believe to be mistaken. In this section I shall attempt to reveal its inadequacy and to make some brief and tentative remarks about the correct liberal approach to moral education.

The fashionable answer to the problem I have posed is based on an analogy which has long held an almost irresistible fascination for philosophers -- the analogy between science and morals. This has been given a novel twist by some contemporary writers who extend the analogy into the field of education. The nature of education in







science can be conceived very differently depending on how we see the subject. We might think of it as a vast body of tested symbolic expressions, and so becoming educated in the discipline would be a matter of coming to understand and believe at least the more important scientific propositions. Alternately, one might think of science as a set of procedures which enable us to evaluate claims to knowledge of a certain sort, by showing some to be justified and some not. Descriptions of these procedures do not express scientific propositions per se but rather specify the criteria which make rational scientific beliefs possible. From this perspective, to be educated in science is not to have this or that particular set of scientific beliefs but to have mastered, to some degree, the process of scientific reasoning. One can construct a theory of moral education which purports to be analogous to scientific education in this second sense. For although we cannot point to a vast corpus of highly confirmed propositions in the domain of morality, as we can in the domain of science, most philosophers would probably now agree that we can legitimately speak of moral reasoning and that its proper procedures are specifiable in principle. Therefore when John Wilson claims that educating children in morality means, roughly, teaching them how to do morality, in much the same way as they might be taught how to do science,<sup>24</sup> he is saying something which at least makes sense. Moreover, he is saying something which is *prima facie* very appealing to people of liberal sentiments since it offers the possibility of a form of moral education which can be successfully defended against the charge of indoctrination. Just as the procedures of scientific reasoning provide an impartial standpoint from which



scientific hypotheses can be assessed, the canons of moral reasoning will provide an impartial basis for evaluating moral claims. To provide someone with the skills and knowledge necessary for rational moral deliberation and to encourage a serious commitment to apply them to his own life is to be no more guilty of indoctrination than a teacher of science is, who fosters a parallel form of knowledge and commitment in a different area. Moral education can thus be defined in way that accords central importance to the values of autonomy and criticism, and so liberal misgivings on the topic would seem to have been allayed.

But before we accept this conclusion the analogy between scientific and moral reasoning needs to be pressed further. Within science we have procedures of inquiry which are justifiable to reasonable persons independently of their current scientific beliefs, but conformity to these procedures tends to establish an extensive though incomplete consensus on scientific matters among such persons. For instance, Jones and I may subscribe to competing scientific theories in a certain area but, as reasonable men, we will recognise that the application of scientific method may render one theory more plausible than the other, and thereby bring us into eventual agreement. Our understanding of scientific reasoning has become a good deal more complex and uncertain in recent years, largely as a result of some fascinating work in the philosophy of science. Perhaps, as Paul Feyerabend has argued, we should conceive scientific inquiry as the judicious use of certain rules of thumb rather than the straightforward application of a clearly defined method, and possibly a considerable degree of scientific dissent is always useful in the



pursuit of truth.<sup>25</sup> But the persuasiveness of Feyerabend's norm of science (if it has any) does not depend on our having any particular scientific theories. And it is not often noted that Feyerabend, as an admirer of Hegel, believes that the clash of opposing views in an "anarchic" theoretical discourse will lead us to a more accurate and comprehensive picture of the truth than any stable consensus would.<sup>26</sup>

It is essential to understand that if Wilson's view of moral education in a liberal society is to be viable it must be possible to characterize moral reasoning in a similar way. If the rules of reasoning which form the content of moral education are defensible only to those who already hold certain moral views or have characteristics that are not virtually essential to reasonableness -- e.g., a strong capacity for sympathy -- then the requirement that these rules be strictly impartial has been violated and so the analogy with scientific education breaks down. On the other hand, if scrupulous adherence to these rules, in deliberation and conduct, does not by itself yield at least an approximate liberal consensus then the moral education we provide our children cannot be expected to perpetuate a liberal society. A thorough respect for the mental independence of the individual on moral matters, it might seem, could eventually lead to social conditions in which the substantive values of liberalism have disappeared; and if we cherish these values we have to regard this outcome as a disaster. In short, it is not the bare fact that there is moral reasoning, just as there is scientific reasoning, which justifies Wilson's program. Its justification will depend on whether or not we can describe a form of







reasoning which meets the following conditions: (a) it is defensible to virtually all reasonable persons irrespective of their specific moral views; and (b) it will yield a recognisably liberal moral consensus and preclude alternatives. One should add that the consensus that is needed must be at the level of actual conduct. Uniformity in professed beliefs is not by itself sufficient to sustain any sort of society. These are very stringent conditions but it is commonly assumed that they, or something very like them, can be met.

The theory of moral reasoning that has been most influential among recent writers on the subject of moral education has undoubtedly been R.M. Hare's. It is the theory which Wilson adopts, along with a host of other researchers. Hare has been a vigorous critic of the assumption that the rational defense of moral beliefs requires any appeal to contestable intuitions.<sup>27</sup> Rational moral argument can proceed only where certain impartial rules of reasoning are observed. These rules are supposedly implicit in our ordinary language and, though they embody no substantive moral presuppositions, a serious adherence to them will secure the liberal consensus we need. Thus he assures us that if pupils can learn the methods of moral argument and apply them conscientiously the only serious obstacle to the agreement we desire will be the inevitable limitations on their grasp of relevant empirical facts. Hare would not want to say that one can absolutely guarantee a liberal consensus among reasonable men. He acknowledges the "possible existence" of amoralists and fanatics who could not be brought to agreement with others;<sup>28</sup> but as the phrase "possible existence" indicates, Hare assumes such individuals



to constitute a theoretical rather than a practical difficulty. Even if they cannot be regarded as necessarily unreasonable we can still say (if Hare is right) that his rules of moral reasoning are neutral among such people as we are likely to meet.

It would be impossible to deal adequately with the numerous difficult problems surrounding Hare's theory. My limited purpose here is to show that this theory does not provide a satisfactory basis for moral education. If this can be achieved we can be pretty sure that other, less sophisticated attempts to define moral education in a way that is both neutral (with respect to the procedures of reasoning it teaches) and liberal (with respect to the beliefs that these procedures establish) will be abortive.

The two properties of moral language which Hare emphasizes in his writings are universalizability and prescriptiveness. To these a third formal characteristic, the alleged necessity that moral judgements override other prescriptions, is added almost as an afterthought in Freedom and Reason.<sup>29</sup> The first two properties call for some brief elucidation. To make a moral judgement in a certain situation, according to Hare, is to commit oneself to the same judgement in all relevantly similar situations. The logic of morals does not lay down a priori what counts as relevantly similar situations but it does preclude one situational factor as irrelevant -- viz., the fact that this or that particular individual would benefit or would not benefit if the moral judgement were acted on in this or that set of circumstances. Moral judgements are impartial between persons. They oblige one to give as much weight to the interests of others in forming such judgements, where the interests of others are



affected, as to his own. (I am using "interests" here, as Hare does, in the normative sense.) This is what is meant by the universalizability of moral judgements. Their prescriptiveness consists in the fact that they entail imperatives to act in whatever ways are commended in the judgements. This allegedly accounts for their action-guiding function.<sup>30</sup>

We can now ask if these facts about moral reasoning -- at least we shall assume that they are facts -- provide a satisfactory basis for moral education. A useful starting-point is to ask if they enable us to provide a sound defense of some uncontroversial liberal belief -- say, the belief that the institution of apartheid ought not to be maintained. A sound defense would be one that enables us to justify the belief to someone who is reasonable but is also a psychologically plausible individual. Since we are concerned with the possibility of a practical agreement in morals, not a watertight unanimity, the possible existence of rational but psychologically implausible individuals need not trouble us. The reasonableness of our hypothetical individual will consist in the facts that he does not play fast and loose with the meaning of words, he carefully observes the rules of logic, he regulates his empirical beliefs strictly in the light of pertinent empirical evidence and finally, these intellectual virtues are combined with a thorough realism in the way that he develops and pursues his interests. However we should also characterize him as someone who does not presently uphold any of the distinctive beliefs of liberalism. He does not, for example, believe that all persons should be accorded equality of consideration regardless of merit or other distinguishing factors.







It is necessary to describe him as such because otherwise the fact that a process of Harean moral reasoning would persuade him of the undesirability of apartheid would prove nothing of interest. It would merely show, what we already know, that liberals find apartheid repugnant. And therefore the fact that we could persuade him would provide no reason for supposing that a program of moral education, based on Hare's theory, would satisfy the requirement of neutrality laid down in (a).. Furthermore we should think of our hypothetical individual as a strongly though not unusually self-interested person who is aware that his interests are very well served by the institution of apartheid. Otherwise, even though the procedures of moral reasoning may be neutral, it will not be shown that moral reasons carry enough weight to override considerations of self-interest so as to establish the sort of consensus, at the level of actual conduct, which is stipulated in (b).

So how would Hare, or an exponent of his theory, persuade such an individual to reject apartheid? It could be pointed out that if one says, "Apartheid should be maintained" he is making an universalizable judgement. He is saying that not only in the world as it exists now but in all relevantly similar hypothetical worlds that institution should continue to exist. Since universalizable principles logically cannot make reference to particular individuals the set of relevant hypothetical cases will necessarily include instances in which apartheid is contrary to the interests of any individual who might be tempted to give apartheid his moral approval. Moreover, moral judgements are prescriptive. "Apartheid ought to be maintained" entails the imperative, "Maintain apartheid in all



situations relevantly similar to this one!" and this in turn implies "Maintain apartheid in all relevantly similar situations where it works against my interests!" Serious assent to an imperative means that one acts upon it (if one is capable of doing so) when the appropriate circumstances arise.<sup>31</sup> A reasonable and normally self-interested man -- i.e., one who is not in the grip of some ideal which leads him to disregard even his own well-being -- cannot seriously assent to the singular prescription that apartheid be maintained where it is contrary to his interests because this would mean actually working to maintain it (if he were capable of doing so) in those circumstances. Therefore he cannot seriously assent to the universal prescription, which entails this singular prescription, that apartheid ought to be continued.

This is doubtless all very clever but would it carry the right sort of persuasive power with the individual we have in mind? I think it most unlikely that it would. If he is reasonable, in the sense I have defined, and if he accepts Hare's account of the logic of moral words he will accept that he cannot properly say, "Apartheid ought to be maintained". But if that is all we achieve then our victory is likely to be a very barren one. For it remains open to him to say, "I still want to perpetuate apartheid in present circumstances since for now it serves my interests very well and I shall advise those who are similarly situated to take the same view." One can give him no reason whatever, in the context of a Harean argument, for not saying this. In fact if he is a normally self-interested individual without liberal moral sentiments he will have excellent reasons for taking this line. Insofar as one is actuated by self-



interest, the distinction between actual circumstances in which an institution works to his advantage and hypothetical cases in which it does not will be of the utmost importance. If doing X will serve one's interests now the fact that it would not in hypothetical circumstances simply does not matter for a self-interested being who is deciding what to do now. For such an individual there is no reason to determine his attitude to apartheid on the basis of principles which require that as much weight be given to hypothetical instances in which the institution militates against his interests as to actual circumstances in which it works in their favour. The viewpoint that is embodied in moral language, as described by Hare, involves a transcendence of the viewpoint of self-interest; but no argument is given, and I strongly suspect that no argument could be given, to show that reason obliges us to adopt the perspective that Hare favours in our practical deliberations. Therefore, a program of moral education that is based on this theory of moral reasoning has not been shown to meet the condition of neutrality. Of course, if the stipulation that moral principles should override others were withdrawn a good case could possibly be made for saying that the remaining rules of moral reasoning are neutral. But we would then have to acknowledge to our pupils, in order to preserve the neutrality of reason, that it is perfectly permissible for them to give permanent priority to considerations of self-interest or even aesthetic reasons in shaping their conduct. If we take this course we are hardly likely to perpetuate a liberal moral consensus.

Hare acknowledges that individuals can opt out of moral discourse in the manner I have suggested, but he does not seem to







appreciate how severely this weakens the force of the rules of moral reasoning he espouses. His dismissal of the "possible existence" of amoralists (i.e., those who take this option) as a theoretical rather than a practical problem lacks an adequate justification, to put it mildly. Hare was perhaps misled here by an analogy which he draws between the amoralist and individuals who opt out of some form of theoretical discourse, such as mathematics, by refusing to make mathematical judgements when called for or by using mathematical terms in some eccentric way. We cannot get the better of such an individual through argument because he has effectively resigned from argument; and the amoralist, in abstaining from serious moral judgement, puts himself beyond persuasion by the rational moralist in an analogous fashion.<sup>32</sup> But there is a crucial disanalogy between these cases which Hare overlooks. With a bit of imagination one could devise hypothetical situations in which one would have strong reason to abjure mathematical judgements or use mathematical terms in some bizarre way, but they would also be bizarre situations. In virtually all the circumstances we are likely to find ourselves in we will not have good reason to take this strange approach to mathematics. Therefore, we can say that reasonable human beings will almost always make serious mathematical judgements when called on to do so. The possible existence of those who would not poses a theoretical puzzle at most. Hare seems to assume that the amoralist is analogous to this theoretical puzzle, but he clearly is not. One does not need to fabricate outlandish cases to exemplify the possibility of persons having strong reasons to abstain from making serious moral judgements of the sort that Hare describes. All we need are cases where the



pursuit of self-interest conflicts with whatever overriding, universalizable, prescriptive judgements we might seriously make. Unfortunately, such cases are all too easy to find in our own experience. The amoralist is not a figment of moral theory but a type of being whom we commonly resemble in the rational pursuit of self-interest.

Even if we could pass off Hare's rules of moral reasoning as neutral between all reasonable men I strongly suspect that we would still have an inadequate basis for moral education. By themselves, I suggest, these rules are unlikely to yield a liberal moral consensus even if they are consistently adhered to. Since they do not entail any moral conclusions whatever the question of what sort of moral views they will lead to is an empirical one, and so it would be rash to pronounce dogmatically on what beliefs universal conformity to them would generate. But we have good reason not to share Hare's confidence that the beliefs will almost inevitably be liberal ones. In meeting the requirement of universalizability we are obliged, if we are serious in our moral thinking, to imagine ourselves in the situation of those who would be disadvantaged as a result of carrying through whatever moral judgement we are contemplating. Hare believes that if we do this then, unless we are among those supposedly rare fanatics who attach more importance to some quasi-aesthetic ideal than to their own well-being, we will be driven to liberal conclusions. This will happen because through vividly imagining the frustrations and sufferings of others when some constrictive social ideal is imposed, such as that of the Nazi, or when serious economic inequality exists we will be induced to adopt a liberal ethic of tolerance along with a more or less egalitarian conception of distributive justice.<sup>33</sup>



This is a very natural thing for a liberal such as Hare to say because from the liberal viewpoint the frustrations and sufferings of other human beings have profound moral significance. I argued earlier that the felt quality of a human life is intimately connected, in the liberal consciousness, with its objective significance. To recognize that human despair might be alleviated considerably by adopting a particular policy is to provide a liberal, along with those who share somewhat similar moral beliefs, with a powerful reason for choosing accordingly. But the significance which such individuals attach to the facts of human frustration and suffering derives from beliefs which they do not share with everyone. It is an obvious fact about human beings that they can be confronted with the most palpable despair and yet accord it little or no importance in determining their conduct either because considerations of self-interest dominate their thinking or because they believe that suffering per se does not have great moral significance. They lack the motive which liberals have to imagine the sufferings of others as vividly as they can, but even where they do exercise imagination in that direction their antecedent beliefs surely make it unlikely that this will induce them to judge as liberals would. Thus it seems likely that unless one has already some beliefs that are at least similar to the fundamental doctrines of liberalism applying Hare's rules of moral reasoning cannot be expected to yield liberal conclusions.

I suggest that there are no neutral procedures of moral reasoning which, once they are taken seriously, will transform virtually all of us into liberals. Liberalism rests on certain highly contestable beliefs about, for example, the moral equality







of persons, the nature of a meaningful human life, and the rights of individuals against collective action. If these beliefs are all repugnant to me there would appear to be no non-partisan viewpoint that reason compels me to adopt that would in turn oblige me to accept them. If there were then moral education would be a much more tractable problem for the liberal than it actually is and this, I suggest, explains the attractiveness in our contemporary situation of theories of moral education such as Wilson's and Hare's. And because the analogy between scientific and moral education breaks down we are faced again with the problem of indoctrination it supposedly solves. How can a liberal society be perpetuated without diverging, in the moral learning it fosters, from the liberal values of autonomy and rational criticism?

It would clearly be possible to instil something rather like the liberal viewpoint in a way that impairs the capacity of children for rational criticism and encourages an heteronomous reliance upon others. A belief in the moral equality of human beings might be maintained in a thoroughly irrational fashion. There might be a dogged reluctance to face any of the serious theoretical problems this belief raises, a willingness to resort to non-rational forms of persuasion to make the belief more palatable to others wherever possible, and a refusal to seriously consider the arguments of those who hold different views. People can obviously be taught to believe in this sort of way, and in the process of such teaching the social and approval desires may be manipulated persistently to secure an unshakeable conviction. This sort of thing can certainly happen, but the pertinent question is whether or not it will necessarily



happen in any serious attempt to perpetuate a liberal moral consensus. I think it is luminously clear that it will not. In fact, one might say that it necessarily cannot happen in that context. For a belief that has been indoctrinated in this fashion will not, except in a very trivial sense, be a liberal belief in the moral equality of human beings. Its propositional content might be the same, of course, and similar reasons might be adduced to support it as a genuine liberal would adduce. But the entire mental orientation which accompanied it would be utterly at variance with the values of liberalism and therefore, in a very non-trivial sense, the belief would not be a liberal one. More generally, we can say that an authentic moral interest cannot be generated by teaching someone to be an irrational and dependent-minded being because the liberal conception of the moral interest is simply incompatible with those characteristics.

The perpetuation of liberal values, if it is possible at all, must occur in a situation where the demands of reason are scrupulously acknowledged and children are gradually led to think for themselves, independently of admired individuals and groups. Hare and his many disciples in the field of moral education are quite right to emphasize this aspect of the process. Their mistake is to suppose that once these conditions are satisfied we have a form of moral education that is necessarily entirely satisfactory from the liberal viewpoint. But our problem is to help originate in children an interest, an especially strong interest, in realizing a particular (and disputable) ideal of human relations; and we distort our understanding of an enormously complex and difficult task if we assume that the commitment we desire is the inevitable



outcome of serious and independent practical reasoning. I have already spoken of the difficulties which are generally involved in attempts to originate interests. The problem is especially acute when what we want to initiate is an interest that very commonly requires one to curb his natural propensities. What is crucial here, commonsense suggests, is whether or not the values of liberalism can be presented with persuasive power in the conduct and discourse of the adults to whom the child is exposed. This can and ought to be done without suggesting that these values are as securely anchored in human reason as uncontroversial empirical beliefs. A deep commitment to certain moral judgements is entirely consistent with an awareness of the limited application which reason has in the domain of morality. This limitation does not make deep moral commitment unreasonable or irrational; and therefore the fostering of such commitment need involve no impairment of the child's capacity for reason. It may still be suspected, however, that being overtly partisan on moral issues in our dealings with children will inevitably compromise their mental independence. In striving to win our positive regard and feel at one with us will children not simply identify with our own moral viewpoint and fail to develop authentic moral commitments for themselves? To answer this question adequately we need to examine the assumed contrast between authentic moral commitment and identification.

In the origination of interests the process of identification will commonly play an extremely important role. An admired individual possesses an interest which I aspire to share. I try to see the object of interest as he sees it and to act towards it in the way that he does.







But even where my conduct in relation to the object of interest is virtually indistinguishable from his the identification may still be unsuccessful. Identification is a mental act, not a behavioural imitation, and we lose the heart of the matter when we confuse the two. Despite my best efforts I might fail to find anything intrinsically valuable in the activities which express the interest and thus fail to genuinely share it, even if self-deception prevents me from consciously recognizing the failure. Moreover, successful identification may survive the loss of esteem for the individual identified with. Suppose that I have developed an interest in J.S. Bach's music, and that its beginning can be traced to an act of identification with my father's interest in the same composer. If the identification has really been successful -- i.e., if the interest really has become mine -- then it is surely likely to survive even if I come to regard my father with contempt or if his interest in Bach suddenly evaporates. Even though identification will normally find its initial motivational impetus in the social and approval desires any interests which are originated through this process can become entirely independent of the operation of these desires. This makes nonsense of the idea that authentic moral commitment cannot be fostered through identification. In fact, I strongly suspect that identification is quite indispensable to the emergence of the moral interest. I suppose that one might pick up an interest in literature rather easily without ever seeing that interest exhibited in a particular human life and recognizing it as an admirable quality that one should cultivate, but the same is hardly true of the moral interest. To understand adequately what that interest is, to grasp its very complex



relation to human conduct and then fashion one's own life accordingly -- all this is surely at least extremely difficult without extensive contact with individuals in whom one can both see and admire the moral interest at work.

From a critique of a novel conception of moral education which purports to break with traditional methods we have been led to outline a conception which initially looks rather old-fashioned. In arguing for the importance of identification one would appear to be commending the traditional emphasis upon example and precept. But the example that is offered in the context of liberal moral education is one to be identified with, not slavishly imitated, and to the extent that moral exhortation is employed it will not be to issue authoritative commands which cancel the need for rational dialogue. Our commitment to liberalism is something we can and should express in our relations with the child but, as I have argued, this should occur in a situation where the demands of reason are acknowledged. There is nothing contradictory in this approach. A liberal moral education is a real possibility, even though it may be rarely actualized at present.



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, Education at the Crossroads (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> See Glen Langford, "Education," Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain 2(1968): 31-41; and John Wilson, A Preface to the Philosophy of Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 15-43.

<sup>3</sup> R.S. Peters, "What is an Educational Process?," in The Concept of Education, ed. R.S. Peters (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 19-21.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-9.

<sup>5</sup> R.S. Peters, "Aims of Education -- A Conceptual Inquiry," in The Philosophy of Education, ed. R.S. Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> R.S. Peters, "Education and the Educated Man" in R.F. Dearden, P.H. Hirst and R.S. Peters (eds.) A Critique of Current Educational Aims (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> See R.S. Peters, Ethics and Education, pp. 144-166; and R.S. Peters, "The Justification of Education," in The Philosophy of Education, ed. R.S. Peters, pp. 239-267. Peters's attempt to justify his conception of education has come in for a good deal of stringent criticism which has, I think, shown his approach to be unsatisfactory. At best Peters's transcendental argument would seem to have established that reasonable men will be seriously concerned with acquiring knowledge pertinent to their life-plans and purposes. But this falls very short of a justification for the ideal of the educated man which his work embodies. Useful criticisms of this interesting aspect of Peters's writings are found in R.S. Downie, Eileen M. Loudfoot and Elizabeth Telfer, Education and Personal Relationships (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1974), pp. 45-50; and J.P. White, Towards a Compulsory Curriculum, pp. 8-15.

<sup>8</sup> In a widely read introduction to the philosophy of education Hirst and Peters try to refute the argument that linguistic analysis of "education", such as they offer, merely reflects the particular valuations of a certain group of language users: "But this type of objection really misses the point of doing conceptual analysis, which is to get clearer about the types of distinctions that words have been developed to designate (P.H. Hirst and R.S. Peters, The Logic of Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 8). But this type of reply really misses the point of the objection, which is that some words, such as "education", have been developed in our culture to designate an enormous diversity of distinctions, and that the different valuations of different language users will deeply affect what distinctions they recognise as legitimate. Their analysis, which







is just a potted version of what Peters has offered elsewhere, does not adequately take account of this fact. Hirst and Peters go on to say (quite rightly) that questions of moral justification are not settled by conceptual points. But there is an obvious sense in which Peters's programmatic definition, masquerading as neutral description, affects the issue of justification. Where a concept that is shared by virtually all language users embodies a particular valuation its explication will clearly carry some persuasive force in support of that valuation, even though it will not constitute a satisfactory justification in itself. For this explication will enable one to say the following to anyone who uses the concept on some occasions but seems to deny the valuation it embodies: "Look, in using this concept you implicitly assent to this value judgement. Yet on other occasions you appear to reject it. You may be right in doing so, but the onus seems to be on you to justify this eccentric position. After all, if ordinary language (or commonsense) is wrong we are entitled to know why it is wrong." Thus if Peters's analysis were satisfactory there would be a reasonable case for formulating the problem of justification in a way that favours the ideal embodied in his analysis. Peters does not actually make this move but the fact that his analysis (if it were successful) would provide grounds for such a move makes it important to point out the failure of his analysis as a description of ordinary language.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Fried, Right and Wrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 152.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. R.S. Peters, Ethics and Education, pp. 37-38.

<sup>11</sup> John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: The Free Press, a Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., 1966), p. 125.

<sup>12</sup> P.S. Wilson, "Interests, Values, and Educational Language," Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain 10 (1976): 165. See also Charles Clark and P.S. Wilson, "On Children's Interests," in Educational Philosophy and Theory 7 (1975): 47. I am not sure that Wilson held this belief about the relation between knowledge and interests when he wrote Interest and Discipline in Education, though at least one section (pp. 83-87) strongly suggests that he did.

<sup>13</sup> P.S. Wilson, Interests and Discipline in Education, pp. 41-43.

<sup>14</sup> P.H. Hirst and R.S. Peters, The Logic of Education, pp. 36-39.

<sup>15</sup> Rousseau, like the philosophers of the Enlightenment who profoundly influenced him, was contemptuous of authority on intellectual matters. Unlike his predecessors, however, he extended his contempt into the realm of education, where the authority exerted in the traditional pedagogical relationship could be seen as a paradigm of misdirected power. The preponderance of verbal instruction and learning through books which characterised the educational process was regarded by Rousseau as inimical to the child's judgement -- i.e., his capacity



to confirm or falsify ideas through the independent use of reason: "The first meaningless phrase, the first thing taken for granted on the word of another person, this is the beginning of the ruin of the child's judgement." (Jean Jacques Rousseau, Emile, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1974), p. 76). In other words, it is to preserve the child's capacity to verify from corruption that learning by discovery was favoured by Rousseau.

<sup>16</sup> J.P. White, "The Curriculum Mongers: Education in Reverse," in The Curriculum: Context, Design, and Development, ed. Richard Hooper (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1971), p. 274.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 275.

<sup>18</sup> John Locke, John Locke on Education, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Teachers College Press, 1964), p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> P.H. Hirst, Knowledge and the Curriculum (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 38-53.

<sup>20</sup> R.F. Dearden, "Autonomy and Education," in Education and Reason, ed. R.F. Dearden, P.H. Hirst, and R.S. Peters Education and Reason (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 72-73.

<sup>21</sup> J.P. White, Towards a Compulsory Curriculum, passim.

<sup>22</sup> P.H. Hirst, Knowledge and the Curriculum, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-43.

<sup>24</sup> John Wilson, Norman Williams and Barry Sugarman, Introduction to Moral Education (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), pp. 26-27.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Feyerabend, Against Method (London: Verso Editions, 1978), pp. 17-33.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that despite his sometimes arrogant tone Feyerabend does not purport to offer the last word on scientific method. On the contrary, Against Method was conceived merely as one move in an ongoing dialectic with Imre Lakatos. See Against Method, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> See R.M. Hare, "Justice and Equality" in Justice and Economic Distribution, ed. John Arthur and William H. Shaw, pp. 121-122.

<sup>28</sup> R.M. Hare, "Value Education in a Pluralist Society," Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, 10(1976): 19-20. See also Hare's Freedom and Reason, pp. 100-101, 159-185.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 168-169.

<sup>30</sup> Hare provides a useful illustration of how universalizability and prescriptiveness apply in moral discourse in Freedom and Reason,



pp. 86-111.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 77-79.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 100-101, 162.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 159-185; and R.M. Hare "Justice and Equality," in Justice and Economic Distribution, ed. John Arthur and William H. Shaw, pp. 124-126.





## FREEDOM AND SCHOOLING

In the radical literature on schooling undoubtedly the most common criticism of traditional practices has been that they constitute a pernicious encroachment upon human freedom. For Rousseau, civilized man was mentally deformed by the pressures of social convention, and this harm was largely wrought through the mis-education of childhood. So the whole point of Emile's education was to form a mind that could retain its native independence in the midst of modern society. Whatever freedom Emile is shown to enjoy while growing up was designed to ensure the realization of the Rousseauian ideal of natural autonomy.<sup>1</sup> In the same spirit Ivan Illich has recently castigated contemporary schooling for inducing the alleged psychological impotence of modern man. This condition can be seen as a loss of both realism and mental independence. To be psychologically impotent is to be the victim of irrational beliefs about how a personally significant life is to be achieved through reliance on manipulative institutions and certified experts.<sup>2</sup> In order to transcend the limitations of our heteronomy, Illich argues, we must deschool society. The point of deschooling is largely to create much greater freedom for the individual in the pursuit of his education. Freedom in this area, it is assumed, is a prerequisite of personal autonomy.

At least in the writings of the more important educational radicals, such as Rousseau and Illich, concern for individual freedom in the educational process does not derive from an indiscriminate worship of liberty. Educational views which are derived from that valuation hardly warrant any serious consideration because the



valuation itself is so implausible. In the first chapter I tried to show how strongly counter-intuitive it was to regard freedom simpliciter as a fundamental good, even where it has the status of only one among others. To the extent that it is worthy of serious consideration, the radical critique of schooling as an institution repugnant to human freedom should be construed as derived from the ideal of autonomy. The gist of this critique, as I shall understand it, is that schooling has tended to impede what I earlier called "basic liberties" -- viz., those freedoms which are essential to the realization of a meaningful life, or which at least considerably facilitate its achievement, largely through enabling the exercise and development of autonomy. In dealing with this critique I shall focus upon its most controversial recent expression in the writings of Ivan Illich and the other deschoolers.

There is an important distinction to be drawn between the diversity of institutions that can properly be called "schools" and the very limited number of forms which schooling takes in the present technological age. In our less imaginative moments we are liable to lose sight of this distinction, to suppose that the possibilities of the institution for good or ill are exhausted by schooling as it is presently constituted. Let us assume that contemporary, compulsory schooling is as destructive of autonomy as Illich thinks it is and that an education for autonomy is what we want. It does not follow that we should follow Illich's recommendation to "disestablish" school by making attendance non-compulsory and creating alternative avenues for the educational process. It does not follow because contemporary, compulsory schooling does not exhaust the possibilities



of compulsory schooling. On the other hand, if the source of our troubles is to be found in characteristics which actually define compulsory schooling -- e.g., if it is compulsoriness which causes the harm -- then "disestablishment" certainly would be justified. I suspect that Illich has failed to clearly grasp the distinction between features of schooling which define the institution and features which are contingently associated with it in a given society. He wants us to deschool but his justification of this proposal consists for the most part, though not exclusively, in a diatribe against aspects of contemporary schooling which are contingent -- its tendency to transform knowledge into an impersonal commodity, rather than a personally meaningful acquisition, and its service to the demands of a meritocratic and consumer-oriented society. In the absence of argument to show that compulsory schooling has to function in the ways that Illich deplores his proposal that we should do away with it lacks justification, however telling his critique of contemporary educational practices may be. It is of the utmost importance that we see this weakness in the deschoolers position because, given the conception of education I have elaborated in the previous chapter, an adequate education for human beings will normally require some form of compulsory schooling despite the restriction of personal liberty that necessarily involves. In this chapter my major concern is to justify this position and to outline the nature of a compulsory schooling system that a liberal could commend with a good conscience.





## Teaching and Deschooling

An example of successful pedagogy outside the confines of schooling which deschoolers often invoke is the remarkable work of Paulo Friere in teaching reading to Brazilian peasants while striving to enlarge their political understanding.<sup>3</sup> Friere's success may well have had a great deal to do with the fact that his teaching did not take place in a school of the conventional sort, but that he failed to establish schools in Brazil based on his pedagogy is an historical fact we should probably regret. That failure was not, quite obviously, the secret of his success. Friere's work in Brazil was merely an unfortunately brief cultural experiment, an abortive attempt to create a new institution. His teaching took place "outside schooling" merely in the sense that it was not undertaken within the existing framework of Brazilian schooling and did not take root as an alternative form of that institution. But suppose that Friere's experiment had not met an untimely end, that his work had flourished and stabilised into a pervasive social practice. It is surely not inevitable that this process of institutionalization would bring about a divergence from the principles of Frierean pedagogy as it was originally conceived -- for example, the idea that instruction in reading should focus on those words that are of urgent personal concern to the learner, or that political understanding should be advanced through a process of reflection on shared predicaments in which the teacher serves to clarify and inter-relate the ideas of the learner. There is nothing intrinsic to these ideas which prevents them from giving shape to educational institutions, and if that were to occur



the resulting institutions would be recognizable as schools. This claim would probably be denied by the deschoolers. They might point to the various ways in which an institution that was designed to embody the principles of Frierean pedagogy would differ radically from contemporary schooling: it would not be rigidly graded according to age; it would not be a mechanism for allocating social roles in a highly stratified society; its administration would not require a costly and often educationally obstructive bureaucracy; and its curriculum would not be remote from the social reality of its clientele. But government would still be government if it were divested of whatever objectionable features it tends to develop in technological, class-based societies and schooling would still be schooling if it underwent a similar transformation.

One might define a school as a teaching-controlled educational institution. The phrase "teaching-controlled" is used in a stipulative sense. I choose it to characterize educational institutions in which learning is largely facilitated and guided by the enterprise of teaching, even if the learner has considerable influence in determining what he is taught and is free to withdraw as and when he pleases.<sup>4</sup> The property of being teaching-controlled enables us to distinguish, as ordinary language suggests that we should, schools from other educational institutions such as libraries and research institutes. The subtle but decisive role of the teacher in Friere's educational philosophy makes it appropriate to describe any institution based thereon as a form of schooling. It is important to have a secure grasp upon the concept of schooling because in recognizing the immense variety of institutions that could satisfy its conditions



one is led to wonder why "schooling" should be a dirty word in one's vocabulary, even if he happens to believe that contemporary educational practices are often grossly illiberal.

One answer to this question, which I am pretty sure Illich would endorse, is that teaching has acquired an undesirable dominance in the educational process. Schools are the institutional embodiment of this dominance and hence there is a need to supplant them with alternatives in which teaching serves a more modest function, comparable to other educational resources, to be availed of or ignored according to the preferences of the learner. The deschoolers are insistent that most valuable learning is not the product of teaching. On the contrary, the knowledge we cherish tends to be acquired fortuitously and spontaneously through "unhampered participation in a meaningful setting".<sup>5</sup> This is the paradigmatic form of learning for the educational revolution they prescribe. In acknowledging the true importance of spontaneous learning, they would argue, we have to see teaching in its true perspective as a significant though peripheral contribution to the educational process. Since schools are by definition teaching-controlled they can form no part of the solution to our educational ills, despite the variety of institutional forms that schooling can take. The major task of reform is rather to re-structure the social environment so that our ordinary experience in work and leisure afford rich opportunities for spontaneous learning.<sup>6</sup> We have supposedly over-estimated the importance of teaching; and schooling, which is based on that misconception, inevitably does violence to the learner's potential for personal autonomy. Not surprisingly, it is Friere's decidedly passive form





of teaching that has won their admiration. In the alternatives to schooling that Illich envisages pedagogy is reduced to two important but strictly limited functions: it would be permissible to acquire some specific skill, a second language say, through teaching; and teachers could also serve as senior members in exploratory discussions.<sup>7</sup>

If the conception of the teacher's role I outlined in the previous chapter is correct this relegation of teaching to the status of one educational resource among others looks very dubious. I have tried to show that a certain form of pedagogy can play a crucial facilitating role in cultivating among children the sort of personal developments we deem to be desirable. For beings who are uncertain of what their interests are or of how they might be best developed, who do not have a sound grasp upon the distinction between fantasy and reality and are often controlled by inordinate social and approval desires teaching is not merely one resource among others, to be used or misused at the individual's whim, but one that cannot be pushed to the periphery of the educational process without the likelihood of severely impeding that process. At least that conclusion seems inevitable until someone can characterize in detail a feasible environment which, if we simply expose children to it, will achieve all that we know good teaching can. Very probably, the deschoolers would not be convinced by the argument of the previous chapter. They would still want to say that the traditional pervasiveness of teaching in the education of childhood is inimical to autonomy and therefore schooling, in any form, is undesirable. I am not aware of any sensible argument that has been put forward to support this position, but it does not require much imagination to see how a commitment to



the value of personal autonomy might lead one to regard being taught as largely repugnant to autonomous development. It will be worthwhile to see how this belief can come about because its superficial persuasiveness may have disastrous practical consequences.

In a paper on the concept of teaching R.F. Dearden has pointed out that to distinguish it from certain closely related ideas we have to ascribe to the agent who teaches a special sort of authority.<sup>8</sup> I suggest that we should make a distinction here, which Dearden overlooks, between teaching which is the activity of teachers and that which is not. My friend's marital debacle may teach me a great deal about marriage but it would not therefore be appropriate to describe him as my teacher. Or let us suppose that two scholars who perceive each other as being of comparable ability and erudition are engaged in a philosophical discussion from which each learns a lot. Afterwards one might say that he had been taught a great deal, but if he were asked to describe his relationship to the other he could not properly say that the other was his teacher. Their mutual recognition of approximate intellectual equality makes it inappropriate to describe either as the other's teacher even though pedagogy, of a certain sort, is an ongoing part of their relationship. It would seem to be necessary to differentiate at least two senses of "teaching", one of which can be applied to any relationship wherein one individual's activity brings about or helps to bring about learning for another, whereas the other concept is unique to relationships that are structured in such a way that there is a recognizable teacher and learner. This is the meaning of "teaching" that is of interest here since it is this concept, not the more general one, that is intrinsic to the



nature of schooling.

The sort of authority that is connected to this concept is rather different from authority as it has traditionally been analysed in political and educational contexts. It is not that a teacher must be either in authority when he teaches or an authority on what he teaches. In a school it is quite possible to divorce the role of teacher from the functions of devising, interpreting and enforcing the rules which govern behaviour in the institution. At Summerhill, for instance, pupils had almost as much authority, in this political sense, as teachers did.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, very few teachers possess sufficient depth of expertise to be an authority of any sort whatever. Authority, in the sense I want to make explicit here, is determined by a difference in knowledge between two or more individuals in a situation where there is a shared perception of the difference. What is needed is a recognition on the learner's part that the teacher, in virtue of some special knowledge that the learner believes him to have, is in a better position to direct efforts to achieve that knowledge than the learner himself or anyone of comparable ignorance would be. In discussion among intellectual equals who perceive each other as such this condition cannot be satisfied because there is a mutual awareness that each is as well equipped as the other to lead their endeavours towards the knowledge which they together seek. On the other hand, in discussion in which the teacher-learner distinction still holds the learner will regard the teacher's contribution rather differently from his own or that of other students: other things being equal, the teacher's comments and criticisms need to be taken with a special seriousness, the questions he raises





are likely to be the important ones, and so on. If, as a learner, I come to see an individual who is supposed to be my teacher as no more competent than I am then, even though I might continue to learn from him, there is a sense in which the teacher-learner relationship has broken down between us. Thus teaching, in one sense, is not a matter of performing an institutionally assigned role.<sup>10</sup> I suppose that in graduate school seminars intellectually defunct professors sometimes tacitly delegate the real task of teaching to their more able students, even though their respective institutional roles remain unchanged. In a good educational institution, of course, the officially allocated role will almost always be occupied by the individuals who do the real teaching.

To teach, in the sense that concerns me here, is to exercise direction over the learning of another human being which the other believes is justified by one's greater knowledge. Direction will take numerous forms -- e.g., recommending books to read, evaluating performances, setting problems to be solved, offering pertinent information. But direction itself, no matter how skillfully executed, is not teaching unless there is a corresponding intellectual deference on the part of the learner. I may be a terrific teacher of Greek under ordinary circumstances but if my students are convinced that I am entirely ignorant of the subject and am just making up words as I go along then I cannot teach them Greek. Intellectual deference is inseparable from the teacher-pupil relationship; and I suspect that it is the more or less confused recognition of this which is at the heart of the radical antipathy to teaching and hence to schooling.

One of the most common radical criticisms of the school is



that it inevitably undermines the critical capacity of the individual. School purports to form critical judgement, Illich tells us, but in actual fact it enslaves the mind.<sup>11</sup> Ian Lister asserts that schools indoctrinate us to believe that "other people" make all the decisions.<sup>12</sup> School presents the social environment as a set of given facts which, for the learner at least, are unalterable. There is just no room in his world for the exercise of independent criticism -- or so he is led to believe. Now it is easy to think that if contemporary schooling really does function in these ways then the heteronomy it fosters must be the virtually certain outcome of the intellectual submission that is instilled through a prolonged teacher-pupil relationship. As a teaching-controlled institution schooling is unredeemably mis-educative.

There is strong evidence for this line of thinking in Illich's writings. He argues that in schooling the child comes to believe that his education depends on the client-expert relationship of teacher and learner. The mental obeisance that is thereby induced makes the individual an easy prey for the other manipulative institutions of the modern state.<sup>13</sup> The root of man's heteronomy is in the teacher-pupil relationship which dominates any institution that is recognizable as schooling. If we value personal autonomy our only option is to deschool.

The weakness of this argument lies in the assumption that when teaching comes to control learning, as it necessarily does in the school, the intellectual submission it requires of the learner can always be expected to encourage heteronomy. Clearly, intellectual deference can have these effects. Pedagogical authority can become



authoritarian, and its impact upon the learner may be to induce a permanent docility of mind. Perhaps teaching has characteristically worked in this way in the context of the school. But there is nothing in the concepts of teaching or schooling which implies that this has to be the case. Confusing teaching, as it has tended to be practised in our society, with teaching simpliciter is as dangerous as confusing contemporary schooling with schooling simpliciter; and it would seem that the two errors are often closely connected.

The concept which causes all the trouble here is that of intellectual deference. In the sense in which teaching presupposes a learner who has this attitude towards the teacher the required attitude is not one of absolute submission. In order to regard someone as a teacher of mine it is patently not necessary that I renounce all right to independent judgement upon the matters he is to teach me about; and, equally clearly, that would be undesirable if part of the point of teaching is to foster autonomy. What is logically required is at least a presumptive deference which, in so far as teaching is successful, will gradually be withdrawn. In being taught philosophy, say, one will gradually learn to evaluate one's own performances in the discipline, to distinguish what is from what is not worth reading in the contemporary literature, and so on; and along with this burgeoning critical capacity the pronouncements of one's teachers, which ignorance initially obliged him to accept largely on trust, will naturally come under sharper scrutiny. The need to defer to another's judgement is gradually reduced as the original disparity in knowledge between teacher and learner diminishes (and is perceived to do so), giving way to a relationship of approximate intellectual





equality. This relationship is the ideal outcome of teacher-learner interaction rather than its ideal starting-point. If one is ignorant in the sense of not knowing how to achieve the knowledge one needs then one stands in need of pedagogical direction. If the direction is genuinely educative it will enable one to eventually find such knowledge for himself, without blind reliance on the authority of others; but if that is to be the result there must be an initial intellectual submission to the source of the direction. In the second chapter it was argued that thinking for oneself, in its most significant sense, was perfectly compatible with a judicious deference to the testimony and expertise of others. In fact, in the many cases where any rational decision must take account of informed opinion thinking for oneself, as opposed to being just contra-suggestible, actually requires that one do so. The submission that is inherent in the teacher-learner relationship can be seen as simply one aspect of this general requirement of reason to acknowledge the relevance of others' knowledge to our own well-being. At the beginning of schooling children are most unlikely to be aware of this. Instead of a tentative recognition of the teacher's superior knowledge there may be an illusion of pedagogical infallibility. Uncritical admiration is likely to be the prevailing attitude rather than justified respect. But these excesses are an eliminable part of the teacher-learner relationship and a genuinely liberal form of teaching will eradicate them as the pupil gradually becomes capable of appreciating the rational basis of pedagogical authority. But to assert that it has no legitimate basis whatever would be grossly misleading. Valuable human knowledge is commonly just too complex and difficult an



achievement to be produced by the independent or co-operative efforts of the ignorant. That is why teaching and schooling are likely to be central to the educational process in any liberal society. Given the institution's potential as a means of facilitating self-realization it makes no sense whatever to say that its persistence must constitute an infringement of the basic liberties.

### The Problem of Compulsion

Suppose we can agree that the school (when it is not conceived in an arbitrarily limited way) has an indispensable educational value that radicals commonly overlook. We have still not undermined the case for deschooling. Although that position is often supported by a critique of schooling per se it is more commonly put forward on the basis of argument against the use of compulsion in the name of education. The school may be capable of evolving in directions that are highly desirable; but as soon as we introduce compulsion the character of any such institution is drastically changed. To deschool, it is argued, is to do away with compulsory schooling for it is compulsion in the process of education which is the real source of our heteronomy. This is the position which has to be addressed.

In Illich's writings there is a strong emphasis on valuable human learning as a process in which individuals fulfil themselves in unique and unforeseen ways. This, I presume, is the general drift of rather opaque but suggestive passages such as this:

But personal growth is not a measurable entity. It is growth in disciplined dissidence, which cannot be measured against any rod, or any curriculum, nor compared to someone else's achievement. In such learning one can emulate others only



in imaginative endeavour, and follow in their footsteps rather than mimic their gait. The learning I prize is immeasurable re-creation.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the essentially idiosyncratic nature of genuine education compulsory schooling subjects the child to a more or less common set of experiences and evaluates success according to universal criteria which discount idiosyncrasy. We are presumably to infer that this opposition between compulsory schooling and true education is unsolvable by mere institutional reform so that our only option is to deschool.

Why should we make this inference? Possibly, one might reason towards it in some such way as the following. A compulsory form of schooling, even if its creators have the most laudable intentions in the world, is necessarily designed for all those who must attend, not for this or that particular individual. Therefore the mode of organization that is developed, the form of assessment that is imposed, and so on, will have to be based on generalizations about what is educationally desirable. But given the individualistic nature of education these generalizations will almost always be inaccurate when applied to individual cases. At least if schooling is non-compulsory I can opt out when I perceive its failure to meet my unique educational needs, but compulsion makes mis-education inevitable.

This argument certainly would be telling if generalizations about desirable human learning really were virtually always wide of the mark. If the educational process were completely unpredictable in its course it is difficult to see how compulsory attendance at a particular institution would often have much educational value for







individuals -- at least one could never tell that it would in advance. But Illich does not believe that desirable learning is utterly indeterminate in abstraction from particular cases. He believes that human beings should learn to be autonomous; and the world they learn to inhabit should be an interesting and personally intelligible one, not an alien environment accessible only to intellectual elites. For Illich these recognizably liberal objectives represent universally valid educational aims. If my personal preference is for psychological impotence and an alien environment this does not constitute one set of individually determined educational goals. In the context of Illich's educational philosophy these outcomes are necessarily anti-educational. Since his conception of education prescribes aims that are applicable to all persons, regardless of individual preferences, it is not obvious that a compulsory schooling system would be undesirable if it were designed to further these universal goals for all those who attend. Of course, given the importance of cultivating individuality within the broad framework set by liberal educational goals any compulsory schooling system should be a very flexible one. But inflexibility is not built into the concept of compulsory schooling. If it is true that some form of that institution is desirable this by itself would not entail that pupils should be subjected to a common curriculum or that all should be evaluated according to common criteria. There is nothing inherently absurd in the proposal that we ought to reform schooling so as to make it sufficiently responsive to the need of individuals to develop their interests in directions that are often unique and unpredictable. Formidable obstacles doubtless exist to successful



reform in this area, but these provide no argument against either the intelligibility or desirability of creating an educationally acceptable form of compulsory schooling. Illich tells us that our imagination has become "all schooled up." That is to say, our capacity to devise institutions to meet our needs has been circumscribed by the model of a coercive and impersonal organization which contemporary schooling imposes. But Illich's own writings manifest a similar kind of myopia to the extent that he appears incapable of imagining a form of compulsory schooling that would be significantly different from the contemporary version.

The belief that the use of compulsion for supposedly educational ends is incompatible with fostering autonomy derives much of its plausibility from the common confusion of coercion with compulsion. A thorough analysis of these rather difficult concepts cannot be offered here but it will be useful to make explicit some of the ways in which they differ. This will enable us to eliminate one superficially formidable objection to the principle of compulsory schooling.

To say that Jones was coerced to do X is, partly, to indicate that his motive for doing X was of a certain sort: Jones was threatened with certain consequences he did not desire if he failed to do X; and even though he would not have done it had the threat not been made the fact that it was made gives him a sufficient motive for doing X. By explaining that an action was coerced one mitigates somewhat the agent's responsibility for what he did. For the threat which coercion involves affects his options in such a way that compliance could reasonably be expected of him despite the fact that his normal preference would be to do otherwise. Coercion necessarily involves the



frustration of the desire one would act upon in the ordinary course of events in which threats do not apply. In being coerced one's conduct is determined by a will that is alien in the sense that it expresses the preferences of another human being, not one's own.

Let us suppose that compulsory attendance at school is always coercive. Those who attend only do so because they fear the threatened consequences of not attending. To be subject to compulsory schooling is thus necessarily to be subordinate to an alien will. This assimilation of compulsory schooling to a form of coercion leads naturally to the conclusion that it is likely to be inimical to the development of autonomy, at least when it is imposed during childhood for lengthy periods. A child who undergoes a prolonged period of coerced attendance will be persistently treated as if his own uncoerced desires were not worth acting on. For that reason it is surely probable that compulsory attendance would greatly inhibit the development of the individual as an independent centre of evaluation and choice. If I come to see my own uncoerced desires as largely worthless -- and that is the image of the self which protracted compulsory schooling will impose -- then I lack the confidence in my own judgement which autonomy requires. I will become just one of the psychologically impotent masses. In short, if one conflates the ideas of coercion and compulsion it will appear that extensive compulsory schooling will be repugnant to the fostering of autonomy and hence undesirable from the liberal viewpoint. The case for deschooling would then appear to be on rather strong ground.

But compulsory schooling is not always coercive because coerced actions form merely a sub-set of the larger category of





compelled actions. To be coerced to do X is to be made to do it despite one's desires; to be compelled to do X is to have to do it regardless of one's desires. In other words, whereas coercion is logically tied to a certain sort of motivation which runs counter to one's preferences the agent's motivation is quite irrelevant to the question of whether or not he was compelled. It is perfectly true that in our society all children of a certain age are compelled to attend school, but it does not follow that all are coerced to attend. This is true because the attendance of every child clearly is not to be explained by the sort of motivation which coercion entails. It is just false to say that compulsory attendance always runs counter to what the child would desire in the ordinary course of events if no obligation to attend existed. Moreover, compulsion is perfectly consistent with a serious attempt to minimize coercion. One can easily imagine a schooling system in which every effort was made to ensure that children sincerely desired to attend and desired to do what they did while attending. A liberal form of schooling would not, admittedly, make every effort in this direction. If we are concerned with developing the child's interests, for example, an indiscriminate indulgence of his desires is out of the question. But if a liberal form of compulsory schooling is successful in prosecuting its purposes then surely it will not normally be coercive. As I argued earlier, our occurrent desires express our interests very commonly -- e.g., Smith wants to read this book because he is interested in the author's work. Therefore it seems most unlikely that compulsory schooling would be effectively developing the interests of pupils if it were usually at variance with their uncoerced desires. If I



generally have to threaten or bribe Jones in order to get him to read Shakespeare it would appear that I am not helping to develop his interest in drama. Persistent coercion, I have suggested, is likely to erode a human being's potential for autonomy; but this gives us no reason for repudiating the principle of compulsory schooling because forms of schooling are conceivable, such as those that are genuinely committed to the value of developing pupils' interests, in which compulsion coincides with the minimization of coercion.

There is, however, a very close conceptual connection between coercion and compulsion. Suppose that I believe that the taxes my government demands of me are entirely justified. I would pay them with alacrity even if payment were requested but not compelled. Therefore the fact that the law threatens tax evaders with serious penalties is quite unnecessary to explain why I am not one of them. And since these legal threats are not necessary to motivate payment in this instance it would be inappropriate to say that I am coerced to pay. Nevertheless, I am subject to the same legal threats which motivate more reluctant tax-payers so that even if I become convinced that all taxation is iniquitous the law will act as a powerful inducement to ensure continued payment. In every case of compulsion there is always at least the possibility of coercion for both compelled but uncoerced and coerced actions take place against the same background of threatened consequences. Without this background neither concept can be applied. If the law did not threaten tax evaders with harm it would not compel payment of taxes. Coerced actions differ from ones that are compelled but uncoerced merely in the fact that the



threats which apply to both are motivationally necessary in the case of coercion. In any ordered society the law compels adherence to certain rules of conduct, but given the diversity of motives for obedience in any society it would be absurd to say that the extent of obedience is the result of equally extensive coercion.

It will be noted that the distinction between coercion and compulsion is irrelevant to determining the range of personal liberty. The effect of a background of threatened consequences on freedom is quite independent of whether or not it provides the necessary motivation for how one eventually acts. Suppose that I am faced with two options, A and B, and that A is what I would prefer in all conceivable circumstances. In the particular situation I find myself I have been threatened with serious harm if I do not choose A. However, given my general preference for A this threat is quite unnecessary to explain why I choose it. Therefore it would be appropriate to say that in choosing A I was compelled but not coerced to do so. But this fact about my motivation is quite irrelevant in determining the extent of my liberty in the situation I have been placed in. Admittedly, I would not opt for B in any situation, including those in which threats did not diminish its eligibility; but I am just as unfree to choose B, given the same background of threatened consequences, in contexts where my natural preference would be for A as I would be in situations where I would prefer B. Empirical facts about human preferences are crucial to the distinction between coercion and compulsion but they are simply beside the point when what is at issue is the area of human freedom.

If compulsion is as restrictive of liberty as coercion one





might doubt that a compulsory but normally uncoercive schooling system, such as I have endorsed, could really foster autonomy over a substantial period of time. Even when a child's conduct in school is uncoerced if he is subject to compulsion and is aware that he is then he will know that ultimately the decision as to what is desirable for him is not in his hands. He is being treated paternalistically, even if it is an especially accommodating form of paternalism. Despite the fact that his wants are accorded a measure of respect in this situation he is still not permitted to judge independently about his own good and, if this situation is maintained for long enough, the individual's capacity and desire to judge in this way might be expected to be adversely affected. It is certainly reasonable to suppose that at some point the extent of any form of compulsory schooling is liable to become excessive in that its compulsoriness will tend, after a certain time, to impede rather than facilitate the exercise and development of autonomy. The moot point is whether or not several years of compulsory schooling during childhood will have this effect. This is an empirical issue, of course, but without any scientific investigation one can see the implausibility of assuming that the facts will point to the need for deschooling. The assumption might have some credibility if compulsory attendance involved an all-pervasive compulsion in the activities of the child while he is attending, but that is not the case. In a genuinely liberal form of compulsory schooling I suggest that the child will be accorded increasing freedom in what he does as his capacity to act in a realistic and independent-minded fashion develops. That is to say, as he progresses towards the condition of autonomy there will be a gradual



diminution of paternalistic interference until schooling itself ceases to be compulsory. One might see this progression simply as an extension of the process I described earlier on wherein the pupil-teacher relationship changes from one of intellectual deference to one of approximate (and mutually recognised) intellectual equality. In either case the crucial idea is that just so much external direction should be exerted over the child as is necessary to ensure that he learns what he needs to. At the latter stages of schooling the partially realized autonomy of students can be reinforced by providing extensive opportunities for its exercise. A partial democratization of authority within the school, say, would be an encouragement to independent judgement for those who already have some capacity for it. Schooling, without ceasing to be compulsory, can accord the child considerable freedom. If that is so then it is difficult to see why compulsion throughout childhood must normally impose an heteronomous self-image.

So far I have been concerned with exposing the inadequacies of some apparently liberal objections to compulsory schooling. However, a positive justification of some forms of that institution is needed if the case for deschooling is to be decisively refuted. It is also necessary to locate this defense in the larger context of a liberal theory of paternalism. By "paternalism" I mean interference with the liberty of an individual with the view of benefiting him or preventing self-inflicted harm. Liberals such as Mill have traditionally been averse to paternalism for reasons that are not hard to find, and we shall examine these a bit later. Nevertheless, a total rejection of paternalism can hardly be countenanced. If through ignorance



or temporary mental derangement I embark on a course of action that will cause me immense harm it would surely be justifiable to interfere with my freedom if that is necessary to forestall the harm. In Mill's treatment of paternalism in On Liberty he focuses upon the reasons for its undesirability. He provides us with no satisfactory criteria for distinguishing circumstances in which paternalism is justified. In particular, we need criteria that will be sufficiently stringent to prevent illiberal extensions of paternalism but broad enough in scope to cover those cases in which, intuitively, we believe such interference to be justified -- including the extensive paternalism that compulsory schooling involves. Without criteria of this sort any justification of compulsory schooling will look like ad hoc support for the intuition that the institution is desirable, but suspicions may persist that the intuition is nonetheless at variance with the liberal's normal antipathy to paternalism.

### Educational Paternalism

In the last chapter I argued that education, in the sense that liberalism requires, is a process by which the individual learns what is necessary or desirable in order to enjoy a significant life. This learning is essentially a matter of developing one's interests while becoming a morally committed and autonomous person. A fundamental part of the educational process in a sophisticated society will be the acquisition of knowledge that cannot be readily picked up in the family or neighbourhood; and it is largely to meet this particular need that the institution of schooling becomes necessary.





I also tried to show why certain obvious empirical facts about children -- the primitiveness of their interests and their ignorance of how these might be best developed -- make schooling especially important for them as compared with other human beings. Now one can easily conceive of situations in which the lack of compulsory schooling for children, even where free access is legally guaranteed, will seriously impede the child's education and hence his personal fulfilment. It will be useful to examine such cases because they enable us to provide a satisfactory justification of compulsory schooling.

Let us assume that a child is interested in school because he has been helped to develop some of his current interests there. Although his interest in school will very probably mean that he wants to attend fairly often it is quite possible that he will very often prefer not to. Indulging passing whims and likings is often more agreeable than the disciplined and often arduous business of developing one's interests, and we cannot say a priori that by allowing the child to do what he wants to he will generally opt for the latter. In fact, it is rather unreasonable to expect a young child to securely grasp the point of developing an interest when all his concerns are rudimentary. If the satisfactions I am familiar with are simple and easily achieved the attraction of what is complex and attained with difficulty will hardly be irresistible. A great deal can and should be done to avoid recourse to coercion or bribery by gradually leading the child towards a deeper appreciation of what interests him, but we certainly cannot assume that he will always have a motivationally sufficient desire to avail of schooling as often as



he should. When a constant desire of this sort is lacking an individual's education is liable to degenerate into projects abandoned when they became too difficult and interests never pushed far enough to realize much of their value. Here at least compulsory schooling (of the right variety) looks like an instance of strongly justified paternalism. To the extent that compulsion is successful in furthering the child's education he will have been enabled to enjoy a more meaningful life than would otherwise have been possible, and for that reason it is implausible to say that the sacrifice of liberty that compulsory schooling involves will constitute any infringement upon the basic liberties.

There is a different kind of situation in which the need for compulsory schooling exists but is perhaps less conspicuous. Suppose the culture in which a child grows up is characterized by certain shared interests of rather limited scope along with an indifference or hostility towards any attempt to develop these or cultivate new ones. Clearly, the background of some children is inimical to the acquisition of knowledge for that reason. Similarly, the school's encouragement of autonomy might conflict with the demands of a culture that imposes some ideal of personal heteronomy. There are a number of ways in which a child in this situation might react to the conflicting pressures to which he is subject, but it is unlikely that he will make much use of the school if he is permitted to not attend. Without compulsory schooling the value he finds in his life may well remain circumscribed by the rigidly defined interests which are approved in his upbringing. These may not be inevitable consequences but they are certainly very probable ones. Where they occur it is



likely that they will constitute a serious harm, and to avoid its self-infliction I would suggest that compulsory schooling is justified.

It might be objected that for children in this predicament the educational value of schooling is rather dubious or, more radically, that a liberal education may not even be in their interest. The former objection might be supported by pointing out that an anti-educational bias in a child's background will normally militate very effectively against the educational process in the school. Moreover, even if schooling achieves a measure of educational success this will involve alienation from the individual's culture. That experience is likely to be deeply painful and the evil it constitutes may not be outweighed by the good of education. If the probability of compulsory schooling being educational is low or if its successes are not clearly an overall good for the individual then its justification in such cases begins to look rather suspect.

It is worth noting here, even though it does not precisely meet the difficulty we are faced with, that a genuinely liberal form of schooling will tend to minimize the sort of cultural antagonism which is the source of that difficulty. Since learning will be focused upon the child's current interests there is unlikely to be any fundamental discontinuity between the culture of the classroom and that of the home. The concerns which give purpose and meaning to the child's life outside the school will be what give shape to his experience inside. Thus the cases of cultural conflict we are considering may be relatively infrequent given a liberal form of schooling, but they can hardly be entirely forestalled. For what is done with the child's interests in the classroom, by using them





as a basis for acquiring knowledge and encouraging autonomy while doing so, may still be at variance with the culture that these interests reflect.

I assume that the value of schooling for an individual will depend on its educational value. A strong paternalistic defense of compulsory schooling for all children will therefore depend in part upon an empirical hypothesis about its educational efficacy for even unpromising clients. It must be possible to claim that the effectiveness of the system is such that even where a child has been indoctrinated with an aversion to education compulsory attendance throughout childhood is likely to foster his education significantly. I believe that there are feasible systems of compulsory schooling in which this level of educational success could be achieved. (If I am wrong, however, any paternalistic defense of that institution for all children is in deep trouble.) It is not necessary to show that in every case schooling actually is a considerable educational success. The decision as to whether or not compulsion should be applied will always have to be made prior to the educational successes or failures in schooling of the individual to be compelled, and so its justification will always depend on the calculation of probable consequences. The fact that a particular schooling system produces some very poorly educated individuals does not show that obligatory attendance for all is either wasteful or evil. Even in the best attainable system one suspects that such failures will not be completely eliminated. If we could identify them in advance there would be excellent reason for not enforcing compulsory schooling for all; but it is most implausible that we could ever do that with precision



and so there will continue to be excellent reason for maintaining universal compulsion as long as there is the likelihood (and if there is the likelihood) that even unpromising individuals, such as those who have learnt to be initially hostile to our efforts, will benefit educationally from attendance.

Even if a schooling system is attainable that is effective enough to make this sort of justification work we are still faced with the objection that for some individuals educational achievement will not be desirable given the psychological disutility of cultural alienation which it imposes on them. The price of education in a liberal society cannot be a total social estrangement since by definition such a society is congenial to the liberal conception of the educated person. Nevertheless, successful schooling may commonly require a painful detachment from the sub-culture into which one was born because liberal values can hardly be expected to permeate every family and social group in a complex modern society, even one that can truly be described as liberal. How are we to deal with such cases?

It is always possible for an educated person to forego the values of his education by opting for a life in which knowledge is largely shunned and heteronomy, in some form, is cultivated. Admittedly, to the extent that he is educated he will be inclined not to take this option. The normal preferences of someone who has learnt to be autonomous and acquired fairly developed interests will hardly be for a form of life in which cognitive activity is minimal and autonomy is suppressed. But if the psychological cost of sustaining developed interests or continuing to exercise autonomy become



excessive the option of a more primitive form of life in which the social and approval desires are easily fulfilled becomes a serious one; and a realistic appraisal of his nature and circumstances may recommend it. Thus if being educated ceases to be a good for the individual, all things considered, he can repudiate it and so no lasting harm will be done. If children reared in contexts where illiberal values prevail tend to renounce their educational achievements eventually one might doubt that their compulsory schooling really was justified; but if they tend to maintain allegiance to the values of their education -- and that is surely more plausible -- this will suggest that the psychological costs of doing so are not prohibitive and hence that compulsory schooling actually does benefit them. In such cases, as in others, compulsion would appear to have secured for the individual a more significant life than would otherwise have been possible.

I have tried to show that compulsory attendance at an educationally effective form of schooling is likely to benefit the child more than free access would. In short, the justification of compulsory schooling consists simply in the fact that education enables us to live more meaningfully and compulsion makes it more likely that our children will be adequately educated. But how is this argument to be related to the liberal's normal antipathy to paternalism?

There is a striking and uncharacteristic absoluteness in Mill's prohibition of paternalism. The reasons which he deploys in his attack on paternalism do not, however, support this view. Instead, they point to a more modest conclusion: viz., that paternalism, at least in the case of mature adults, will commonly fail to





achieve its ostensible goal of furthering the good of those who are subject to it. Firstly, an individual of mature faculties is more interested than anyone else in discovering what course of action will best serve his own good because he, unlike any paternalistic interferer, will prosper or suffer as a result of the course that is taken.<sup>15</sup> The individual who is accorded paternalistic authority, one might argue, will be interested in furthering his own well-being and will tend to use his authority for that end. Thus the natural egotism of human beings makes it probable that unfettered paternalism will result in a relationship that is more like that between a slave and his oppressor than it is like the bond between a father and his child. Furthermore, Mill points out, the individual who is to be interfered with already has desires which he knows better than anyone else and this is the only reliable evidence one has to go on as to what his good consists in.<sup>16</sup> (I take it that by "desires" in this context Mill has in mind, roughly, the feelings of attraction that inform (or would inform) one's free choices rather than just any attraction that might arise in one's mind. The latter, even in the case of mature adults, contain too much that is imprudent and destructive to count as pertinent evidence about anyone's well-being.) Briefly, not only is the individual more interested in his own well-being, he is also (normally) more knowledgeable about what it actually consists in and so he, rather than some paternalistic busybody, is best equipped to decide what conduces to his well-being.

On the face of it, however, these reasons against paternalism may seem to apply as much in the case of children as they do in the



case of mature adults. Is it not true that children are just as self-interested as other human beings and at least as vulnerable to oppression masquerading as paternalism? and do they not have desires which they understand better than others? I think we can meet this objection without altering the thrust of Mill's argument. In the first place, although children are strongly self-interested it does not follow that they are strongly interested in their own well-being, and a fortiori, it does not follow that they are more interested in furthering it than a benevolent adult would. The concept of well-being presupposes a perspective from which remote satisfactions and frustrations are anticipated and accorded comparable importance in determining one's conduct as more immediate satisfactions and frustrations. This process of anticipation, if it is to be successful, requires extensive knowledge about the self and the world in which it will act; and the application of foresight in the determination of conduct requires a developed capacity for self-control. The younger the child the more limited his understanding of the self and the world is likely to be, and similar limitations will be apparent in his capacity for self-control. Therefore it is reasonable to expect that an experienced adult who understands the child well and is concerned to promote his well-being -- and teachers must be adults of this sort in a genuinely liberal form of schooling -- will normally be both more knowledgeable about and more interested in the child's own good than the child himself.

Similarly, it is easy to see why the desires of children should not be taken as reliable evidence of what their good consists in. For those who tend to regard desires as forming the ultimate moral



category this rather obvious point will be obscured. Illich, for instance, sometimes seems to take this view of desires. He tells us that an educational system should seek to provide its clients with what they want rather than what they ought to learn.<sup>17</sup> But this principle is inconsistent with Illich's educational philosophy. His entire critique of contemporary schooling and of similar institutions rests on the assumption that the desires of human beings ought to be of a certain sort -- i.e., they ought to desire autonomy and an environment that is personally intelligible and under their control. An educational system that pandered indiscriminately to every desire of the learner would not be true to the educational ideal that pervades his writings. From the viewpoint of liberal moral theory, as I have defined it, the desires of individuals are not facts of ultimate moral significance but have relevance as indications, more or less reliable, of what course of action will contribute to the significance of their lives. In the ordinary course of events, if I am a sane and tolerably knowledgeable adult, it can be assumed that my desires will indicate how my good can be best advanced. At the very least, they will be rather better evidence than the judgements of even a well-intentioned paternalistic overseer. They will reflect the settled interests and likings I have developed over time, and will be regulated by my knowledge and partly developed rationality. Their satisfaction can be expected to enhance the felt significance of my life, in the ordinary course of events. A paternalistic overseer, though his judgement might be occasionally superior to mine, lacks the "inside" understanding of my experience that enables me to judge more accurately, as a rule, about my own





well-being. That is to say, he will lack the intimate knowledge of my aspirations and concerns which only I possess. And since my desires are shaped in the light of this knowledge there is normally a strong presumption that paternalistic interference in my conduct will merely inhibit me in the pursuit of my own good. This presumption will also be supported by the liberal conviction that a fully significant form of life must be characterized by autonomy. The latter can hardly be expected to flourish if, having attained adulthood, my free choices about my own good are commonly interfered with by allegedly paternalistic others. But although a recognizably liberal argument will reveal the close connection between the desires of adults and their self-realization the same argument will not work in the case of children. As I have already argued, children will lack the developed understanding of personal well-being that a normal adult has and therefore their desires cannot be expected to be regulated by that understanding. Secondly, the psychologically difficult attribute of personal autonomy is unlikely to be achieved by children who naturally lack realism and mental independence unless they are fortunate to be subject to paternalism of the right sort. Of course, as children mature they will come to understand better the nature of their own well-being and, hopefully, approach the condition of autonomy; and corresponding to these developments there will be a diminution of the range of legitimate paternalism. The rather stark contrast I have drawn between childhood and adulthood is intended to vindicate the importance Mill attaches to the distinction in his theory of paternalism. It is not intended to obscure the fact that there is a vagueness between these two conditions



which has implications for the justified use of paternalism. To treat children on the verge of adulthood with the same degree of paternalism as would be justified towards infants would be to perpetrate a moral outrage. I shall return to the educational implications of this point at the end of this section.

I have tried to show that the reasons which underlie the liberal antipathy to paternalism in the case of normal adults do not support a similar aversion in determining how we should treat children. In fact, the same concern to facilitate significant living which reveals the need to severely limit paternalism when we are dealing with adults also justifies rather extensive paternalistic interference in the conduct of children. Certainly, if we accepted an absolute prohibition on such interference one probably could not accept Mill's discrimination between the cases of children and adults. If one asserts that the evil consequences of refraining from paternalistic interference are never sufficient to outweigh the evil of the intervention itself when the freedom of adults is at stake it is difficult to see how one could consistently justify paternalism against children. For surely any justification of that practice will depend on our attaching considerable moral weight to the evil consequences of forgoing the practice.

In determining whether or not paternalism is called for two conditions would seem to be necessary and jointly sufficient: (i) the intervention is likely to bring about some good for the individual or protect him from some evil; and (ii) the individual's conduct, in the event that we did not intervene, would be the expression of a mind that had lapsed somehow (or failed to attain) a minimal



standard of informed and rational decision-making. The second condition is intended to severely limit the range of paternalistic behaviour that might appear warranted if the first were alone stipulated. It is true that one might interpret the notion of adequate decision-making in such a way that even normal adults would very frequently lapse from the standard; but this would defeat the liberal purpose behind the second condition which is to insist that unless some unusual defect of ignorance or irrationality distorts the decision-making of an individual he is to be treated as the best judge of his own well-being, even though we might believe that he would benefit from paternalistic intervention.

It will be objected that the first condition really is sufficient. I have already argued that paternalism will be very commonly self-defeating in the case of normal adults, because of their superior understanding of what personal well-being consists in, whereas the child's lack of such understanding creates a need for well-directed paternalism. Would it not be consistent with this consequentialist approach to say that paternalism is justified whenever it is likely to prevent evil or do good? The reason I would not want to say that is not because it is actually false but because it would be dangerously misleading. By stipulating this condition alone one would be tempted to think that when we take an external view of an individual's life and calculate that this or that intervention is likely to forestall harm or further his good then we are warranted in interfering. By focusing exclusively on the ideas of good or harm one is likely to overlook the relevance of the individual's subjective view of these matters. This is





especially likely when his interests are very different from our own. The result of this oversight will probably be unjustified paternalism because the interference will be directed not by an accurate conception of the individual's good but by the interferer's conception of what his good should be. The second condition I have stipulated is not really logically distinct from the first, given that the individual's good and evil are ascertained in an appropriate liberal fashion with due weight given to his own perspective, but serves rather as a reminder of the importance of that perspective. More precisely, it reminds us that unless some obvious defect of decision-making exists the desires that inform someone's decisions should be taken as the best indication of where his good lies.

Nevertheless, the second condition does pose some very difficult problems of interpretation which I am not able to fully resolve here. The idea of minimal adequacy in decision-making needs to be given a high degree of precision so that we can treat borderline cases of justified paternalism in a more clear-headed manner. There are many circumstances in which the condition of adequacy is very obviously not satisfied, but just as obviously there are many cases where our intuitions are much more uncertain. Preventing someone from swimming in waters which he does not know are shark-infested is a paternalistic act that few would take issue with but legislation pertaining to dangerous drugs, for instance, commonly gives rise to much more problematic cases. One very general difficulty about this second condition is that it seems to involve respect not for the actual empirical will of the individual but for a rational and informed will which may be very different from its empirical



counterpart. This sort of move generally has a bad odour for liberals and to avoid making it in the theory of paternalism some writers have chosen to postulate the explicit or tacit consent of the individual interfered with, usually delivered some time after the interference, as a necessary condition of justified paternalism.<sup>18</sup> Thus if Jones thanks me for preventing him from crossing a bridge that is about to collapse his consent to my interference, according to this theory, will justify my action. The trouble with this is that for subsequent consent to really justify interference it is necessary that the consent itself expresses a mind that satisfies certain conditions of informed and rational decision-making. If one's consent is given while he is seriously misinformed about the circumstances of the interference or while some blatant defect of reason impairs deliberation then it is difficult to see why the consent that is given should be of any moral consequence whatever.

Liberal suspicions about the condition of adequate decision-making appear to stem from the assumption that it will require a complete disregard of the particular interests and desires of those who are subject to paternalism. But there is no reason why the conception of adequate decision-making which guides interference should not be systematically connected with the interests and desires of the individual whose freedom is to be encroached upon. In an excellent article on the subject of legal paternalism Joel Feinberg shows how this connection might be worked out.<sup>19</sup> As Feinberg persuasively argues, there is a weak form of paternalism which is nonetheless in accord with the anti-paternalistic spirit of On Liberty. He points out that there is a class of actions which can be described



as involuntary in that they do not express what the agent would choose deliberately, in a moment of cool reflection, with his settled interests firmly in view and with all obviously relevant knowledge at his disposal. Feinberg's notion of voluntary action is thus logically tied to a rather modest level of rational decision-making. What the agent chooses deliberately may strike us as bizarre, even foolhardy, but voluntary actions are nonetheless faithful to the individual's conception of the good in a way that other actions, based on ignorance or some temporary passion, frequently are not. If an action is involuntary, in the sense that Feinberg stipulates, and looks like bringing harm upon the individual then there is surely an excellent case for paternalism.

But how do we know that a particular action is involuntary and hence that intervention would be justified? Feinberg's answer is that there are certain actions which create a powerful presumption of involuntariness, given our knowledge of human nature -- e.g., the use of very hazardous drugs. Such actions would seem to place the burden of responsibility on the agent to show that he is in fact acting voluntarily, and the greater the hazards attached to the action contemplated the more fastidious the law should be in assessing the evidence which he puts forward. Nevertheless, if the liberal spirit of this form of paternalism is to be retained the condition of adequate decision-making must be fairly easily satisfied. If, for instance, the individual is in the grip of an addiction that he desires (too weakly) to overcome then there is good reason to prohibit him from using the drugs. But suppose that we know he has cultivated the addiction, despite an adequate understanding of





the risks involved, because he attached overwhelming importance to moments of ecstasy. Even now he remains steadfast in his allegiance to this value judgement although the damaging consequences of his addiction are becoming abundantly clear. Feinberg's theory of weak paternalism would permit temporary interference in such cases in order to forcefully remind the individual of the consequences of his drug-taking. This would be done, however, to make sure that drug-taking really was a deliberate choice for the individual, faithful to his own conception of the good. It would not be designed to impose an alien conception of the good upon him. Of course, it is very tempting to say that an ideal of ecstasy at all costs is so wildly eccentric, so utterly at variance with our ordinary understanding of what makes a human life meaningful that no rational will could choose it as an object. But for a liberal this temptation exists only because it is extremely unlikely that anyone would deliberately choose such an ideal, with a normal awareness of the misery he may suffer as a result of pursuing it and of the possibilities of alternative ideals. Because such a choice is so implausible there may be good reason for placing an absolute prohibition on the use of heroin, say, rather than judging each case of potential use of the drug as a possibly deliberate choice. The very slight risk of unjustified paternalism which the former procedure involves is surely preferable to the latter which would be enormously costly and would involve the different and more likely risk of failing to act paternalistically when we are justified in doing so.

As Feinberg admits himself, a great deal needs to be done to clarify the ideas of voluntary or deliberate choice which is central



to his theory. Nevertheless, it would seem to be the right sort of theory to cover instances of justified paternalism in the lives of normal adults for it enables us to interpret the concept of adequate decision-making in a way that acknowledges the crucial importance of the individual's own values. The state can protect its citizens from the obvious self-inflicted harms without assuming the rights of final arbiter as to what gives or does not give meaning to their lives. However, one cannot simply extend Feinberg's theory to subsume our intuitions about paternalism towards children. It has been already shown that a child's desires cannot be taken as a reliable indication of where his good lies, and this would seem to be true even if the desire is formulated after a process of reflection in which whatever knowledge that is relevant to his choice has been made available to him. The notion of deliberate choice does not apply to the child's conduct in the way that it does to the adult's because the rational deliberation of which the adult is capable is only partially and fitfully approximated. For that reason we cannot be guided in our paternalistic actions towards children by the same deference towards the individual's own deliberate choices which should regulate paternalism towards normal adults.

How, then, should paternalism towards children be guided? The correct but unilluminating answer is that guidance should come from the best understanding we can arrive at of the child's long-term good. More specifically, the content of the last two chapters enables us to outline the direction of his good in the area of education. I have argued that a fully meaningful life is an autonomous one and that where an individual's interests are all rather primitive



their appropriate development is likely to greatly enhance the felt significance of his experience. I have also tried to elaborate a conception of education that would reflect the importance of both developing the individual's interests and fostering personal autonomy. Educational paternalism towards the child, if it is to be justifiable from the liberal viewpoint, must be guided by this conception of education.

But it would be wrong to think that this line of argument entitles us to use as much compulsion as we like in order to produce autonomous persons who possess fairly developed interests. There is a point at which attempts to foster the personal ideal that is fundamental to the liberal viewpoint become illiberal. We can see why this should be so by exploring an apparent contradiction at the heart of liberalism. Venit Haksar has recently pointed out that liberalism appears to embrace two opposing views of the good for man.<sup>20</sup> This apparent conflict is very evident in Mill's On Liberty and in the writings of that most eloquent and perceptive contemporary liberal, Ronald Dworkin. On the one hand, Mill's argument includes a large element of passionate advocacy for the ideal of autonomy, along with the related values of individuality and social diversity; but he is also insistent that the desires of normal adults are the only reliable evidence of where their good lies.<sup>21</sup> Although Mill ignores the fact we should note that the desires of human beings are not always for autonomy. In Taking Rights Seriously Dworkin echoes Mill in his assertion that "freedom as independence" -- presumably he has some notion of personal autonomy in mind -- is fundamental to liberalism.<sup>22</sup> But Dworkin has also affirmed that





"government must not force a conception of the good life upon its citizens, or justify political decisions by preferring one vision of human excellence to another."<sup>23</sup> But autonomy is one ideal of human excellence, albeit a rather formal one, and if serious efforts are not made to foster that ideal then a liberal society is not likely to last very long. Thus we would seem to be faced with an inconsistency: advocacy of the specific ideal of autonomy co-exists in liberalism with the belief that the good for particular individuals may be found in heteronomous forms of life if that is their desire. However, the contradiction is only apparent. The ideal of autonomy is central to liberalism and we are justified in vigorously promoting that ideal through educational paternalism towards children. But liberal tolerance requires a recognition that for many individuals the best life possible may fall short of that ideal and that the optimum development of their interests may not carry them very far on the road to knowledge. The examined life is not the only one worth living.

The exercise of educational paternalism must be tempered by this tolerance. We have to be alert to the fact that at some point in the compulsory schooling of any student it will become apparent that further paternalistic efforts on our part are unlikely to be warranted, even if his education has not progressed much. To determine when this point has been reached is a very difficult problem of judgement; but some general comments can be made here which will, hopefully, be of some help. If we face this problem under present conditions I suppose that our tendency is to err on the side of paternalism. An early exit from the schooling system under present



social conditions tends to consign the individual to a low position in the social hierarchy where work is menial and unsatisfying. To incarcerate a child for a few more years in the schooling system, with the hope of marginally improving his social prospects, looks like the lesser evil. But I have doubts about the wisdom of this rather desperate paternalism. If after several years of compulsory schooling someone sincerely desires to attend no longer then his desire has to be taken very seriously, even if he has yet to attain the mental maturity we would expect of a normal adult. In the case of an older child such a desire will reflect his appraisal, which may well be more accurate than our own, of what further schooling has to offer him and of what the consequences of his leaving would be. If consultation with the individual shows that he has a reasonable argument to support his desire to leave then, even if we believe that it would be preferable for him to stay longer, it is difficult to see how continued compulsion could be justified. For how could we justify its continuance without requiring a more stringent level of adequate decision-making for the child than we require of the adult when considering if paternalism is called for? It was suggested earlier that a consistently liberal theory of paternalism demands that as the child approaches the maturity of his faculties the range of justified paternalism diminishes to the very limited area in which adults may legitimately be interfered with for their own good. We can certainly allay some of our misgivings about letting the child go his own way by trying to mitigate the possibly evil consequences of his action -- e.g., by improving the access of adults to educational



resources. That is surely the correct way to express our solicitude for the child. A persistent paternalism merely betrays the superficiality of our tolerance.





## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See Jean Jacques Rousseau, Emile, pp. 10-11, 76, 292.
- <sup>2</sup> Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 44-45.
- <sup>3</sup> See Paolo Friere Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. Myra Bergman Romos (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970).
- <sup>4</sup> This definition of schooling was suggested to me by the penultimate paragraph of R.F. Dearden's excellent article "The Concept of Teaching," in his Problems in Primary Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. 63-68.
- <sup>5</sup> Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society, p. 44.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 22, 101.
- <sup>8</sup> R.F. Dearden, "The Concept of Teaching," in Problems in Primary Education, pp. 65-68.
- <sup>9</sup> A.S. Neill, Summerhill (New York: Hart Publishing Co., 1960), p. 7.
- <sup>10</sup> Perhaps one should identify a further sense of "teaching" which applies to the performance of an institutionally assigned role. Dearden's essay on teaching seems to be concerned with this concept. This is suggested by the fact that he speaks of teaching as logically connected to rights and obligations between teacher and pupil. But this does not alter the fact that there is a more fundamental sense of "teaching" which I am concerned with here. It is obvious that a teacher may continue to perform his institutional role, exercising the rights it confers upon him while his students meet their obligations qua students; and yet he may have ceased to teach in a more basic sense, perhaps because he has lost credibility with his students or because they have eclipsed him intellectually and are aware of having done so. Teaching in this more basic sense is connected with a certain sort of authority but I suspect that the concepts of rights and obligations have nothing to do with it. See R.F. Dearden "The Concept of Teaching," in Problems in Primary Education, p. 67.
- <sup>11</sup> Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society, pp. 52.
- <sup>12</sup> Ian Lister, "The Whole Curriculum and the Hidden Curriculum," in Deschooling, ed. Ian Lister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 93.
- <sup>13</sup> Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society, pp. 52-53.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 45.



- 15 J.S. Mill, On Liberty, p. 93.
- 16 Ibid., p. 125.
- 17 Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society, p. 80.
- 18 See Rosemary Carter, "Justifying Paternalism," Canadian Journal of Philosophy 7 (1977): 136; and John D. Hodson, "The Principle of Paternalism," American Philosophical Quarterly 14 (1977): 65-66.
- 19 Joel Feinberg, "Legal Paternalism," in Joel Feinberg, Justice and the Bounds of Liberty (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 116-119.
- 20 Vinit Haksar, Liberty, Equality, and Perfectionism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 231-235.
- 21 J.S. Mill, On Liberty, pp. 67-70, 125.
- 22 Ronald Dworkin, Taking Rights Seriously, pp. 262-263.
- 23 Ronald Dworkin and Brian Magee, "Political Philosophy," in Men of Ideas, ed. Brian Magee, p. 259.



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